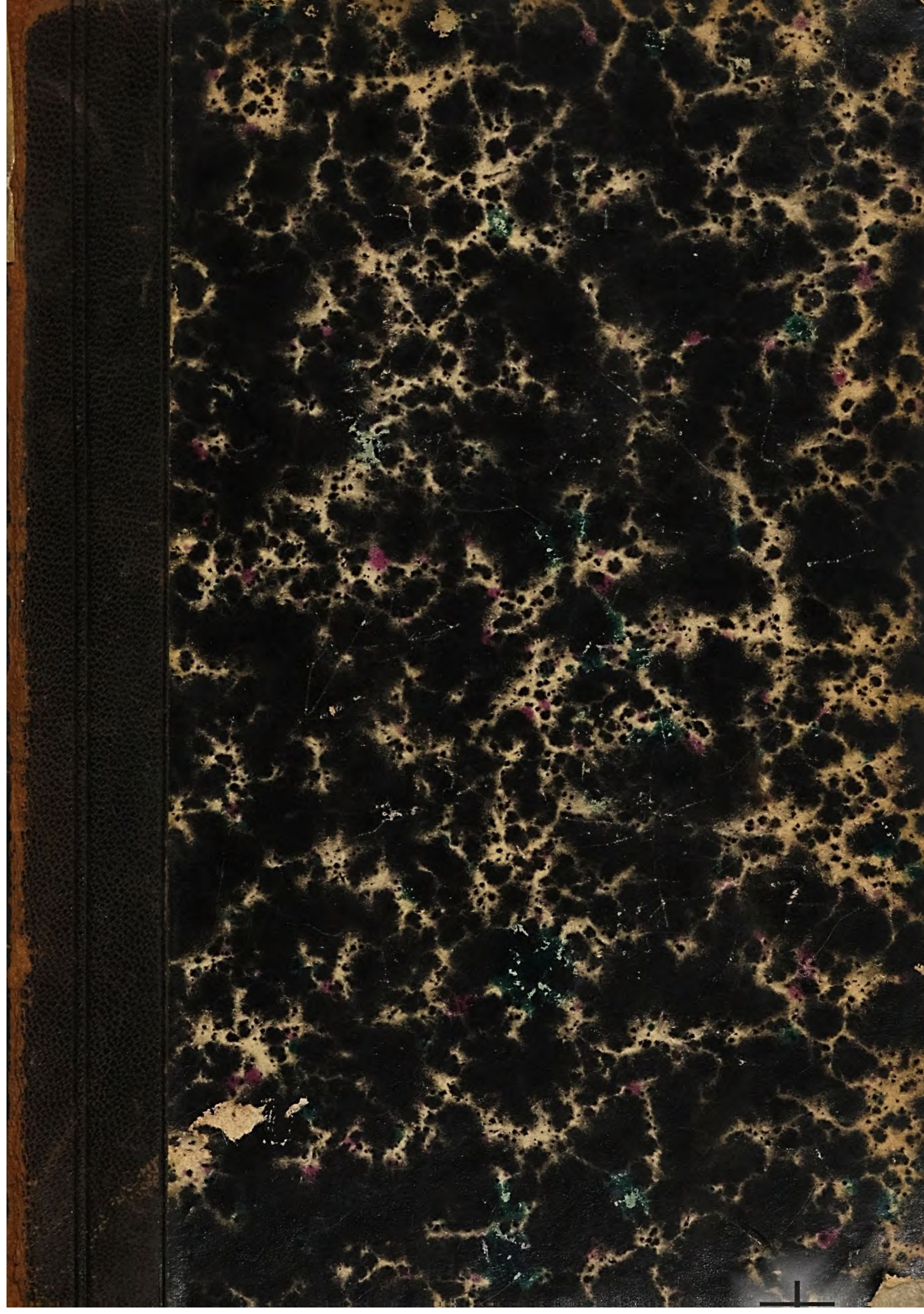




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VOL. 2110.

EXCHANGE NO ROBBERY, ETC.

BY

MISS BETHAM-EDWARDS.

IN ONE VOLUME.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.

PARIS: C. REINWALD, 15, RUE DES SAINTS PÈRES.

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AUTHOR OF "THE SYLVESTRES," "FELICIA," "FORESTALLED,"

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EXCHANGE NO ROBBERY;

OR,

FATED BY A JEST.

PRELIMINARY.

WHAT relation the principal character figuring throughout my introductory pages bears towards the actors in this little drama from real life I am not at liberty to disclose. Those who follow the strange occurrences here for the first time put together must supply the link for themselves, and will easily discern the motives for reticence in such a narrative. With a certain amount of caution and disguise it is permissible to relate incidents in daily life that warrant us in asserting truth to be stranger than fiction. But without a certain mystification of facts and circumstances, without a veil, no matter how transparent, thrown over personalities and places, no licence of the kind could naturally be taken by the story-teller. He must quit the field of actualities and either build up his stories from the gossamer of his brain, or the less vivid but more substantial texture of recorded history. The idealised romance of everyday life touches us most of all.

Some years ago I happened to be left like a forgotten parcel in a homely little German capital familiar

to most English tourists. I had joined half a dozen acquaintances, who, with slender knowledge of each other's tastes and powers of endurance, had agreed to make a summer tour in company, of the programme of which, as might be expected, only a part was carried out. Some of my fellow-tourists went one way, some another, but on one point all were unanimous. I should be picked up in a few weeks for the journey home. As it was my first experience of foreign life, and as I had neither a well-furnished purse nor the frame of a mountaineer, I preferred to stay behind, expecting to be called for, which never occurred. In so far as my companions were concerned, I might have remained in that little city till this day.

The "Golden Lion," at which I stayed, was the foremost hotel in the place, but as unlike accepted notions of a first-rate hotel as it is possible to be. The prices were absurdly low. Its twelve o'clock ordinary was more like a large family dinner than a *table d'hôte*, and unattached wanderers like myself were treated rather as kinsfolk than customers by the kindly hostess, Frau Erleb, and her husband. I had my place between them at the dinner-table, around which gathered occasional English and American tourists, besides daily frequenters from the town. I was even made welcome into Frau Erleb's cheerful parlour, and to the use of her little Marie's piano whilst the child was at school. I joined my host and hostess in holiday walks and drives, and was escorted by them to the opera. By way of reciprocating favours, I gave the little girl English lessons. Altogether, by the time I had spent a few months there, I felt as much at home at the "Golden Lion" as if I

had known the place and people all my life. The homely friendliness, perhaps verging on familiarity, of these good folk, if occasionally distasteful, was of great service to me. Had there been the slightest distance between us, any approach to formality on my part, any subservience on theirs, an easy intercourse would have been impossible. By frankly inviting their confidence, I was enabled to realise German middle-class life as few foreigners can ever do, and was put in possession of the facts making up the incomparably romantic little history I am about to relate.

My hostess was one of those curious mixtures of homeliness and culture found nowhere out of Germany. She belonged to the humblest peasant class by birth and bringing up, yet, owing to more favourable circumstances later in life, had acquired a love of music and the drama. The outward sordidness of her life therefore had its reverse side, and at the opera or concert-room so sincere was her appreciation that it was difficult to believe that the rest of the day was spent in household drudgery.

She was a person of one idea, and I soon gathered from her talk and manner of looking at things that, like a great many other people, this one idea was a romance—a romance with which her own inner life had nothing to do. The story of her own betrothal and marriage was of the most prosaic kind. There was the kindest friendliness towards the worthy host of the "Golden Lion;" and admirable maternal sentiment, but no poetry or passion, in her affection for the little Marie. She diligently performed her part as spouse, mother, and housewife, and devoutly followed the Lutheran persuasion. But the spiritual part of her,

the glow of inner feeling, the unspeakable something that lifts us out of ourselves, and by virtue of which the grossest of us are less material than we seem, all these found no expression, and had no root in the life she led from day to day. My good Frau Erleb—and how many another!—obtained her share of the poetic side of life vicariously, and it thus wore almost the aspect of an æsthetic contemplation. Just as the portrait of a beautiful face rather than the beautiful face itself, affords an æsthetic enjoyment, so it is with that perception of finer and lovelier existence, which lie outside our own. We study them as a picture.

The landlady of the "Golden Lion," by virtue of this insight into a sunny world of beauty, sportiveness, and delight, had two selves, the one belonging to her own narrow, coarse-textured lot, the other centred in an airy, fanciful, but, as we shall see, by no means dream-like existence, and belonging above all to a secret. Therein lay the real romance of this dual life. She was the holder of a romance and a secret—the coarse earthen vessel into which has fallen some glittering gem—and somehow, I have never yet quite divined why it was, that secret she confided to me.

I have reasoned on the matter many a time, and perhaps, all things considered, her confidence, thus placed in a stranger and a foreigner, is not to be wondered at. We all know well enough that secrets are never kept; the burden is inevitably cast off by the bearer at some time or other. In Frau Erleb's case it had been kept a very long time, more than half the span of her existence, and there were several reasons why what she had never even confided to her husband should be disclosed to a foreigner and a

stranger. In the first place, there could be no possible blame to expect from a disinterested listener like myself. I had nothing whatever to do with the circumstances or the personages mixed up in her story, and had no right to make comments. Again, to the untravelled mind of my hostess, I wore an outlandish look, an air of remoteness that invited confidence. An Englishwoman, an insignificant school-teacher desirous of learning German, an educated lady, moreover, with whom she had contracted a warm sympathy, I seemed to her the last person in the world to whom it was dangerous to speak out. But, above all, I could see that the desire to make a revelation, pent up now for twenty years and more, had grown too strong to be checked. Had I not been near, some one else would inevitably have become the receptacle of her secret. So, by little and little, the worthy soul unburdened herself, and having thus opened her lips on the long-forbidden topic, would hardly close them again. When alone with me, mending the house linen, preparing fruit for the stew-pan or salad for the table, she would laugh, weep, and go into ecstasies over the story a dozen times a day. The approach of her husband or little daughter was the signal for an immediate change of subject and of manner; the interruption over, she would resume the broken thread of her discourse as if nothing had happened. The most minute incident, the least little personal detail having to do with her story, were related to me again and again, till I seemed to have the whole living reality before me. Frau Erleb, though she knew it not, had indeed, whilst pouring these unique experiences into the ear of a sympathetic listener, built up a glowing romance.

There was nothing for me to add, little to take away. Never surely wore any episode from real life so much the appearance of an airy creation springing straight from the brain of a story-teller.

CHAPTER I.

THE fruit season was at its height in the fruity Suabian land, and the opening day of the long summer holidays had come, as usual, with the last bloom on pear and plum. As the cumbersome old stage-coach with its yellow-jacketed postboys stopped at the door of the Catharine School for girls to pick up some passengers for the little village of Stefansburg, a veritable apparition of health, joyousness, and beauty appeared on the doorstep. This was Hilda, the most promising pupil of the school, and a girl commanding universal admiration for her sprightly, imperious ways, startling loveliness, and warm, impulsive nature. She was just eighteen, and possessed the tall vigorous growth of the peasant race, and also the indescribable something that proclaimed admixture of gentle blood. Blonde and slender, she presented the type of German maiden, not only as idealised for us in poetry and fiction, but as it still adorns the world in daily life. These fair-haired, graceful creatures, who too rapidly develop into solid matrons, are not at all after the pattern of their English or American sisters. Possessing as much intellect and animal spirits as they, they often possess also a greater capacity for artistic and sensuous impressions. The character of Hilda unmistakably indicated itself in the emergency that

now overtook her. As she stood on the threshold of the school-house, peremptorily ordering the disposal of her luggage, a peasant lad came running towards her in hot haste bearing a crumpled letter. Holding forth the missive, he stood by, breathless and speechless, wiping the big drops of sweat from his forehead.

What Hilda read, with her pretty brows knit and her lips pursed up, was this:—

“My Hilda,” ran the ill-penned, ill-spelled note, “thou must not return home as yet. Take the stage-coach to thy aunt Kätchen instead. Thy foster-sister, the Countess Hildegarde, was brought home ill of a fever last night, without a word of warning, and there is risk for thee.—Thy loving Grandmother.”

The young lady, having read the paper, now coolly tore it into a dozen fragments and scattered them to the winds.

“Take thy place on the coach and leave my trunks alone,” she said to the astonished lad, who had begun hastily to haul down her boxes. “Thou art going to Stefansburg, and so am I.”

The boy stared at her without feeling quite sure of the safest line of action before him. If it seemed impossible to disobey his mistress, the Frau Anna, it seemed more than impossible to disobey the Fräulein Hilda, as the Hilda of former days was now called.

“Take thy seat, I say,” she repeated, using the *thou* and *thou* of colloquial usage in these parts. “Art thou hungry? There is no time to eat and drink before we start.”

“I have my victuals with me, but I will go in and

get a mug of beer," replied the lad. "Did you understand the letter, Fräulein Hilda?" he ventured to ask.

"Perfectly," was the young lady's reply. "My grandmother had her reasons for wishing me to stay; I have my own for wishing to go. Now make haste and fetch thy mug of beer."

He went indoors, Hilda musing thus as her glance fell on the little bits of torn paper lying about the wheels of the stage-coach.

"That I must stay away, forsooth, because my darling Hildegarde is ill of a fever! It is my duty to nurse her, whatever be the matter, and it will help her to get well to see her foster-sister again!"

Throughout that long journey the girl's mind, far from being disturbed by the probable consequences of her prompt decision, was in a state of positive exhilaration. She chuckled over the surprise in store for her grandmother, and Gretel the dairy maid. With the natural audacity and nonchalance of youth, in her case counterbalanced by largeness of heart, she saw herself called upon to take the initiative for many reasons. Her grandmother, she argued, was old, and could take no account of the march of progress. "She forgets," reasoned Hilda, "that in these days people are taught to destroy contagion instead of running away from it. She forgets too what my education has been, and how it will here stand me in good stead."

"I am the very person," further reasoned the young lady, "now needed at home. Here is just the opportunity I have longed for to prove my affection to Hildegarde, and also to renew the intercourse of old happy days! My little princess! my darling!"

She also reflected that now, if ever, was the time for demonstrating to her grandmother and the benighted village-folk generally, that the value of a first-rate education did not consist in book learning and the ornamental branches of knowledge only; they would see that education, when worthy of the name, inculcated the higher moral qualities also—such as self-sacrifice, self-possession, and the power of discerning right from wrong under conflicting circumstances. Meantime the heavily laden old vehicle crawled now up hill, now down hill, now between long stretches of orchard fragrant with mellow fruit, the heavily laden apple and plum branches sometimes intercepting its way, now by sloping vineyards and fields of corn and maize, all glowing in the brilliant September sunshine. Not by any means romantic, not even picturesque, is this South-German landscape, but teeming with the fruits of the earth and rich in the homelier of Nature's gifts. On such a September day the scene positively dazzles with the brilliance and variety of colour, the purples, violets, crimsons, and orange of clustered fruit, the intensity of green below and blue above, pure sky bending over sweeps of verdure.

The bright eyes of Fräulein Hilda, however, were not occupied with the familiar sights and sounds on either side. As far as she was concerned, the day might have been one of cloud and fog, and the surrounding country bare as a desert. She was entirely absorbed in the thought of her foster-sister, her namesake, whom she loved better than anything in the world. Perhaps Hilda's imagination had more to do with this idolatry than she was at all aware of. The

girl's existence from earliest childhood had been far too narrow for her energies and capacities, especially of the understanding. She wanted a wider field for action, a more extended scope of observation; above all, a superior social position.

The return of her quiet little foster-sister awakened all kinds of slumbering aspirations and dormant hopes connected with them, for the little Countess Hildegarde, as she was called, though in reality a more exalted title was properly hers, belonged to that great enviable world for which Hilda craved. In early childhood this fact had formed the superstructure of Hilda's wide dreams, and now the very thought of reunion stirred them once more in her heart.

Hildegarde sick, who but her humble sister of adoption should attend upon her? Hildegarde convalescent, their old childish intimacies would be renewed. And Hildegarde well, what more probable than that she might obtain permission to take back with her into the stately ducal palace far away, her foster-sister's closest friend? To cross the borderland dividing peasant from princess, sordidness from splendour, a narrow social groove from the great theatre of life, such were the girl's ambitions, and Hildegarde was the person who could prove an opportunity.

Never had that homeward journey seemed so tedious. "Would they never arrive?" she asked of the postboys again and again. The sun had almost touched the vineyards rising high above the village, when at last they did reach their journey's end. Hilda's cheeks flushed with excitement as she prefigured the encounter to come. It must be confessed—and let her youthful in consequence, perhaps hard-

ness, be not too severely blamed—the thought of her grandmother's stupor of astonishment, and of the maid Gretel's frantic ejaculations, made her smile by anticipation. It would be not a little ludicrous, but she should have her way.

And true enough, as daintily picking a path through the somewhat miry road leading to the farm-house, her appearance was the beginning of a commotion that might have turned out badly for the sick girl, had she not been placed in the other side of the house.

The first person to perceive her was Gretel, just then coming out of the neat house with a pailful of milk in each hand.

"Ah, heavens! the young lady!" was all Gretel could say; and, brought to a sudden standstill by the surprise, her frothing pails were jerked on one side, and half the contents spilled—a misfortune that honest Gretel hardly forgot for years after.

"Ah, heavens! the young lady!" she went on ejaculating to herself, not for worlds venturing to stir a step further. Hilda had worked all the mischief, it was Hilda's place to lead the way. Truth to tell, poor Gretel hoped that, in the excitement of her granddaughter's return, the severe dame Anna would overlook the wasted milk.

Hilda, not one whit abashed, walked coolly into the kitchen, when, however, a single word from the horrified old lady within did blanch her cheeks for a moment.

There is no necessity to mention the uncomely word that for a few instants made even the audacious young Hilda turn pale and feel a trembling of the

knees. The nature of her foster-sister's illness was of a more dreaded kind than she had surmised, and it was held in especial horror throughout Germany just then, on account of the epidemic form it was wearing in some parts.

But Hilda's dismay was transient, and her attitude of splendid fearlessness did not a little to check dame Anna's almost hysterical lamentations and Gretel's loud-spoken terrors. Her chivalrous notions of attending on the invalid were, however, peremptorily stopped by an authority to which even she felt bound to bow.

The young but clever village doctor, friend and neighbour to boot, who happened to arrive that moment, refused her request once and for all. The utmost she could obtain from him was permission to remain in the house and make herself useful in the kitchen.

"You have vaunted your knowledge of cooking obtained at the Catharine School," said Dr. Edouard, so called to distinguish him from his uncle, an old-practitioner of the same surname; "now," and as he spoke he perused her with underlying satire, "now is the time to prove that it is not all empty boast."

Hilda tossed her pretty head.

"I am able and willing to make anything and everything you order for your patient," she said. The girl's high spirit would proclaim itself in all her actions, even the most trivial. "Please, Dr. Edouard, give all your orders to me."

A looker-on might have supposed, from the bewitching little cooking costume in which Hilda presented herself before the young doctor next day, that she was an arrant coquette bent on captivating him by

a display of the prettiest pair of wrists in the world. But such was not the case; at least, no coquetry actuated the girl's mind at that moment, only a mixture of spite and playful bravado. She was bent on displaying her powers, bent also on creating as much of an impression as possible. She did not seek to charm, only to impose.

"I have no objection whatever to give you orders so long as they are carried out to the utmost particular," the doctor replied, his brown eyes still mischievous and inquisitorial. "Any deviation from them will be punished by immediate banishment."

Hilda made a little grimace of disgust.

"The sooner we get the princess well," she said, with some show of temper, "the sooner we shall get rid of a tyrannical doctor. So no fear of lapses on *my* part, then, Herr Doctor."

"You might have put the same sentiment in more amiable form," said Dr. Edouard, evidently much amused; "however, as the intention is good, I forgive the rudeness of the speech."

"Thank you," replied Miss Hilda, dropping a pert little curtsy.

The doctor drew from his pocket a piece of chalk, and thereupon very deliberately made a line from the spot where Hilda stood by the kitchen table to the staircase.

"This line you are not to pass," he said; "and, as you have chosen to come here in defiance of all prohibition, you must sleep with Gretel in an outhouse as best you can."

"We shall make ourselves perfectly comfortable," was the young lady's reply.

"And you must give me your word to attempt no manner of communication with my patient at present," added the doctor.

"If you have no faith in my honour, my word will avail little," answered Hilda.

"Then you quite understand, Fräulein Hilda," he said, and looked from her to the chalked line much as a schoolmaster laying down the law to a child; "you know what you may and what you may not do."

"I am neither blind, deaf, nor an idiot, thank Heaven," was the retort.

"A little womanly meekness should make you more thankful still," replied the doctor. "But time presses; proceed at once to make some chicken broth and lemonade."

Hilda turned away frowning, although the pair had no more skirmishes for some days. The doctor came and went by another entrance, communicating with that part of the house given up to the invalid alone. A slate was suspended outside the window bearing his orders for the day, and describing the condition of the patient. The food was hoisted upstairs by a temporary lift contrived by the young doctor for the emergency. For days Hilda and Gretel had no other communication with the improvised hospital upstairs.

CHAPTER II.

ONE fact meantime had lightened all hearts. The nature of the young Hildegarde's illness had been misconceived, and, although stricken of a dangerous fever, it was not that kind most dreaded of all. No fear for the sweet girlish beauty Hilda remembered so well; things went nevertheless ill at first, and Dr. Edouard was so absorbed in wrestling with the malady that he had no time for skirmishing in the lower story.

"Ah!" thought Hilda, ever apt to be ungenerous where the clever, rational, dominating young physician was concerned; "Dr. Edouard will make a fine cure. He will be decorated, he will be made court physician ere another year be out!"

No such motives were at work in Dr. Edouard's mind. It was not the exalted rank of the patient, rather her abject helplessness, that had appealed to him. He never thought of the daughter of an illustrious house, but of a lonely and neglected girl confided to his care under circumstances of peculiar hardship. In his eyes the fragile existence of the seventeen-year-old maiden wore added sanctity from the fact of its evident insignificance to others.

Truth to tell—this fact, as well as the supposed nature of her malady, must be dwelt on for the proper elucidation of the story—Hilda's foster-sister was a waif and stray, an orphan and a nobody; hardly any living soul throughout her great-uncle's dominions could be less important. But she belonged to the ducal house, and, however unfortunate such a fact to a family

already overburdened with poor relations, she must be provided for.

But after what fashion? There were several reasons why the little girl was confided from earliest infancy to Frau Anna, the highly respectable wet-nurse to royal duchesses of two generations back. The child's future position was not yet decided upon. Offspring of a marriage unratified by ducal permission, it had seemed probable at one time that she would lose her princessdom altogether.

Such a decree would by no means exceed the sovereign's prerogative, and how much less expensively could she be provided for as Sister Dorothea or Sister Justine in one of those semi-conventual institutions offering a refuge to decayed Protestant ladies of noble family!

Anyhow, it was advisable to keep her in the background for a time; so under the name of the Countess Hildegarde—none but Frau Anna's immediate family being supposed to know of her exalted rank—she had passed in her earlier years. Happy enough they were, for she was well cared for; she loved her foster-sister and namesake Hildegarde—called Hilda in order to distinguish them—better than anything in the world. They were *sœurs de lait*, Hilda's mother having acted a maternal part to the royal fosterling. There seemed, indeed, a tie of blood between them, so fondly were they attached to each other. On Hildegarde's part it was the clinging of the weaker to the stronger, the sentimental to the coldly intellectual, a difference seen from their earliest years.

"Oh! Hilda," the other would say, as the days and the weeks and the months glided by, "dost thou not

think I shall stay with thee now altogether, and that I am quite forgotten at my grand-uncle's?"

Her utmost ambition went no farther than this, but the little peasant-born Hilda would make impatient retort: "Thou shouldst rejoice at the bare notion of being sent for, and becoming a princess in reality. If I were in thy place, the prospect of such a summons would make me dance for very joy!"

"Ah! thou knowest not how I love thee, how I dread to find myself among strangers!" replied the other. "I have nightmare dreams of going away. I am sure it would break my heart."

"Hearts are not so brittle; and think of balls, court ceremonies, diamonds for thy hair, and a prince to marry thee! Foolish little thing!" cried Hilda, impatiently. "Would that I were Hildegarde the princess, and thou Hildegarde, peasant Anna's granddaughter!"

"But even so things would not come right, for we should be separated all the same."

"Well, child," retorted the monitor, sagely (she ever appeared grown-up by comparison), "thou wilt never become high-spirited any more than I shall ever be lowly-minded. Let us be happy while we can."

Quite suddenly, when the little Hildegarde was old enough to be confirmed into the Lutheran Church, the dreaded summons had come. She was removed from her foster-parents, and in a remote dower-house, given up to poor relatives and pensioners of the ducal house, had passed the intervening years.

Hilda was sent to school at the capital, and for years knew little of her darling except that she was busy with lessons under a governess.

No wonder that now Hilda's brain was in a whirl at the prospect of renewing their intercourse. "And surely," she thought, "at last the princess is to become a princess indeed." This notion filled her mind with all kinds of vague hopes and dreams, as yet kept to herself alone; for, although all anxiety for Hildegarde's recovery was soon at an end, the same amount of caution was long necessary.

The foster-sisters contrived to interchange ideas long before they were permitted to see each other; and when, at last, Dr. Edouard carried his patient to a seat in the garden, a mimetic conversation was carried on through the window.

All the playfulness and *diablerie* of Hilda's character came out now, and she invented a series of signs by means of which she could say anything she pleased, only Hildegarde understanding. Thus, with Dr. Edouard standing by, she would give utterance to such drollery as this:

"Send the monster away!" or, "When is the tyrant to go?" and so on.

At last the embargo was finally removed and the ardently desired meeting took place. The foster-sisters were permitted to see each other as if nothing had happened; and on a balmy October morning found themselves sitting side by side, with arms entwined, happy as long separated lovers.

"Oh, my own little Hildegarde! My sisterling!" Hilda cried, for once giving way to German ingenuous expansiveness.

"I must beg that you will not unduly excite or fatigue my patient," interrupted Dr. Edouard, with

considerable asperity. He had lingered by the garden gate in order to witness the meeting. "No late hours," he added, "no immoderate walks, no tricks played with the invalid's diet."

Hilda looked the thought she was too impatient to utter. She had her arrows ready to fly at the young physician, but preferred to let him go in peace. And the sooner he went the better—so her looks said, plainly enough; no retort could have been sharper.

The young doctor, evidently both out of patience and temper, bowed and went, looking back, however, at the charming picture he had left under the walnut-tree.

Fair Teutonic maidens of a certain type are often strangely alike, and a stranger coming suddenly upon these two must have mistaken them for sisters. Both had that abundant fair brown hair which adds so much beauty to German girls; both had regular features and were of the same height, possessing figures slender as yet, but sure, in Teutons, to take the decided outlines characterising their countrywomen as soon as they have passed extreme youth.

When you came to expression, and that intangible self proclaimed in speech and gesture, all likeness ceased. Hildegarde, in her happiest moods, was hardly less vivacious than Hilda, but hers was a vivacity of passion rather than of understanding, whilst Hilda's intensity had as yet nothing to do with feeling and sentiment.

Hilda's audacious, aspiring nature craved the world as a stage for action—the world of hazard, of action, of intrigue. Hildegarde's notion of a perfect life went

no further than a strong arm to shield her from all outward ills and a chivalrous heart on which she could rest in heaven-like serenity.

CHAPTER III.

"HEART of gold! kindest of men!"

"Insupportable tyrant! officious prig."

The exclamations were uttered by both girls in a breath as the retreating figure of Dr. Edouard vanished behind the orchard-trees. They looked into each other's faces and laughed outright at the incongruity of their speeches.

"You cannot really entertain a handsome opinion of a man like that?" Hilda cried, flushing with indignation; "a man who evidently holds women only good to be trampled on! Recall his manner to me."

She rose from her kneeling posture at her friend's feet, and thereupon, with an admirable mimetic power somewhat tinged with malice, imitated Dr. Edouard's authoritative speech to her a few minutes ago.

The caricature was so perfect that, though greatly vexed and mortified, Hildegarde could not restrain another merry laugh.

"You would turn the very saints into ridicule," she said, embracing the mimic with the passionate, admiring fondness of childish days. "But indeed, Hilda, you must learn to love Dr. Edouard."

"Love him!" cried Hilda, with a gesture of disgust; "Heaven forbid! We are taught to forgive our enemies, but there is nothing said in the Catechism against making fun of them."

"I am sure Dr. Edouard is no one's enemy, much less yours, dear Hilda," replied Hildegarde. "But he does not understand your sprightly ways, and, like all doctors, he is somewhat masterful."

"His masterfulness has nothing to do with his profession; it is inrooted in his character. No, Hildegarde! Ah! pardon me for forgetting the difference of rank between us——"

The princess pressed her hand deprecatingly, and Hilda went on, once more in her favourite attitude, kneeling on the ground beside her friend.

"No, it is not professional presumptuousness I should ever complain of in Dr. Edouard or any other physician. A man can only carry his purpose by means of authoritativeness. But I see in him a spirit that characterises all the rising young men of our day, a spirit of antagonism to women."

"Heavens, Hilda, what may you mean? Such ideas are quite new to me."

"I mean just this: that Dr. Edouard recognises in me the typical woman of the future, a woman who aspires to be man's equal in everything. Would grand-mamma only permit it I should go to Zürich for the purpose of studying medicine and obtaining my medical diploma. What would Dr. Edouard have said in such a case?"

"I believe he is quite a different Dr. Edouard from the one you have in your imagination," Hildegarde said, blushing deeply. "In any case you must love him for my sake."

"I would love the arch-fiend himself for your sake," the girl replied, her wild mood dashed by Hildegarde's agitated blush. "My own little sister, what ails you?"

As she said this, looking into her foster-sister's face with deep concern, Hildegarde's embarrassment had increased. She turned away her face, her bosom heaved, Hilda divined that she was on the verge of bursting into tears.

"Do not forbid me to weep," she said, putting away Hilda's deprecatory hand. "Tears are the only medicine I need now, and you know" (here she smiled whilst the tears ran down), "I have been quite well for days past. It was only Dr. Edouard's——"

"Spirit of domination," put in Hilda.

"Dr. Edouard's more than care for me that has kept me an invalid so long," Hildegarde added, reprovingly. "I am well enough to weep my heart out, as I will, as I must. Oh, Hilda! my sister, my only friend. The joy of it, the despair of it! I love him. I, the Grand Duke's grand-daughter, I love Dr. Edouard, the village doctor."

Hilda was not to be dismayed, at least outwardly.

"Love is the sport of a summer day; it comes and goes," she said, whilst the princess wept on. "Let love of Dr. Edouard make you happy whilst it can," she added, "and by-and-by" (here she drew away the other's hands from her streaming eyes), "by-and-by you will be content to forget romance and marry some fine prince, or king it may be, not for love, but for things more durable."

"You jest, or I should feel that I had my friend no longer. You cannot entertain such ideas as those," Hildegarde said, drying her tears. "But be serious; let me take counsel with you, for it is as I say, and nothing can make it otherwise."

"Then I see little counsel to be given, or com-

fort either, my poor Hildegarde. No greater misfortune could have happened to you!”

“Oh, Hilda! I feel it; I know it. The mischief is done and there is no mending it.”

“Nothing in the way of presumption on his part would astonish me. Pray forgive the speech, darling, I will be careful in future! But that *you* should be able to overlook his plebeian birth and manners; well, to say the least of it, Hildegarde, a man so wanting in polish and good tone; that does astonish me——”

“You are doing Dr. Edouard great injustice. Pray listen, Hilda. He has never breathed a single word to me of reciprocated feeling as yet. The imprudence, the want of propriety, the audacity are all on my side.”

“Are you not sure that he cares for you then?” asked Hilda, unable to conceal a slight shade of contempt. Her exalted notions about her sex were receiving a considerable shock.

“I hope, I believe—yes. I am quite sure that he loves me,” cried the impulsive Hildegarde; “only of course pride forbids him to open his lips—pride and the tenderest consideration for me. He does not think of himself——”

“Then he is wholly unlike the rest of his sex. But go on, my darling; I interrupt.”

“You must have noticed a look of trouble, of sorrow not unmixed with joy, in his countenance during these last few days,” resumed Hildegarde. “He has come and come, although you know, my dear, I have been absolutely well for weeks past; and he has talked of a last visit so reluctantly. Oh, Hilda!” (here she again burst into tears and leaned her face against

her friend's breast), "tell me how things may come right between us two."

"Courage, courage! tears or despondency never won a battle yet, and your case is not absolutely hopeless."

"Is it not? What can happen to make it possible for Dr. Edouard to marry me?"

"A great many events might make it possible," Hilda replied, with mock gravity. "Annexation, revolution, a Socialist rising. Your great-uncle's independence as a sovereign" (here she spoke quite seriously) "is said not to be worth a twelvemonth's purchase. Prussia's mouth has long been watering for his dominions, as all the world knows."

"Indeed, I had no idea of it," replied the young princess, somewhat perplexed as to the bearing of Hilda's prognostications on her future and that of Dr. Edouard. "Would annexation, revolution, or Socialist risings compel my great-uncle to retire into private life then?"

"Most likely; and if none of these changes were to take place," Hilda said, bent on cheering up her companion at any price, "a thousand unlooked-for possibilities may bring about the fulfilment of your wishes."

"You think of a thousand, and not one have I been able to discern as I look into the gloomy future. Oh, Hilda! make haste and tell me what they are."

"You may be forgotten six years now, as you were forgotten six years before. You would be of age. You could then marry Dr. Edouard."

"But all marriages contracted by members of our family must be ratified by the Grand Duke himself."

"The Grand Duke may die, and your marriage might take place before the Hereditary Grand Duke, a minor, comes of age."

"And what else might happen?" Hildegarde asked, anxiously.

"You may not only be forgotten for six years, but forgotten altogether."

"Oh, would that I were! That would be bliss indeed. And what else, dearest Hilda?"

"You may wring permission from the Grand Duke to marry whom you please, on consenting to renounce your title."

"Never! never! You do not know my great-uncle. He would let me shut myself up in a convent, or remain single, a wretched dependent, all my days, but marry a humble village doctor! Never!"

"Dr. Edouard may discover some lapsed title of nobility in his family. He may buy back the title, may offer himself as your suitor in the light of a veritable grandee."

"Ah! that, I fear, is hopeless too. He is too proud," replied the poor girl. "Have you no other hopes and possibilities to place before me, Hilda?"

"Hopes and possibilities are not to be numbered. They are like the stars, or the sands of the sea. But I will tell you how you may be saved, for once and for all."

Hildegarde flushed, and she fixed her eyes expectantly on her companion's face.

"Your fate, like that of every other reasonable being, is in your own hands. The time is gone by, thank Heaven, when a girl of spirit is treated like a piece of merchandise or a slave. If you cannot compel your

relations to sanction your marriage with Dr. Edouard, at least they cannot force you into marrying anyone else. What you have to do is this. Suffer yourself under no persuasions or threats to be led into contracting an engagement till you are of age. In the meantime, the marriage laws of the country may be altered. Or, in case of the Grand Duke's death—it is not inhuman to foresee the death of a man nearly ninety—in case of the Grand Duke's death, you may obtain permission of his successor to marry whom you please. Fortunately for you, my darling, you belong only to a collateral branch of this proud family, and, if you could slip into private life quietly and without scandal, perhaps your cousins and second cousins, the haughty princesses who seem to love you so little, might not be ill-content.”

“They hardly know me, indeed. I have been kept as a veritable prisoner in the school-room, and the only two souls who loved me since I went away I shall never see again. My faithful maid is dead, and my dear old governess, Madame Grace, has returned to her own country. How can I ever go back? If I could only believe in the future you place before me!”

“Well, there is no question of going back at present, and to-day's *Gazette* reports the departure of the court for Nice. You would only be an extra expense (the Grand Duke's parsimonious ways are well known by his faithful subjects, dear Hildegarde!) So make your mind easy that you will be here when Christmas comes to prepare for the Christ-kind, as in the old days.”

Thus saying, Hilda kissed her foster-sister fondly,

and brought back smiles to that sweet questioning face.

"Let us now talk, not of separation and dreariness, but of little cheerful things we have to do," she added, in her usual superior, dominating way. "I will at once procure you the materials for working Dr. Edouard a pair of slippers, and whilst working them you can tell me all about the court, and the grand doings there. I should like it a thousand times better than any novel."

Hildegarde opened her eyes.

"Do you not know it?" she asked, with a look of astonishment. "I know as little of these things as when I went away six years ago. No, Hilda, I want nothing so much as to talk of something else," she added, archly.

But Hilda's curiosity would be satisfied.

"Tell me, at least, what became of you. You must have seen the Grand Duke and the princesses your cousins. You must have been at the palace."

Again Hildegarde opened wide her large blue eyes.

"From the day that I left you," she said, "I have been lonelier than a prisoner. Not that I was unhappy or unkindly treated. My dear Madame Grace! my good kind Hannchen! How I loved them! and poor Hannchen, you know is dead. But I will tell you the whole story from the beginning."

Hilda held up an admonitory finger.

"You know the tyrant's orders! Not too much talking, and none that can distress you, as yet."

Hildegarde had indeed tears in her eyes as she mentioned the name of her maid Hannchen, and she could not resist a few words more, although the subject evidently distressed her.

"I lived entirely with those two," she went on; "sometimes in the winter-palace, sometimes in the country, but never when the court was there. And just as I had quitted the school-room, and was to be introduced, I fell ill of this fever caught from Hannchen. I do not wonder that everybody was angry with me, and that I was sent away!"

"Well," Hilda said, "we will be as happy now as the day is long, and I will talk to Dr. Edouard from morning to night if you will only consent to take me back as your companion—your *lectrice*—that is the word."

"Do not let us talk of going back at all," Hildgarde replied, with a deprecatory shudder; "although, indeed, for a time life might be bearable there if you were with me."

"So we will first make up our minds that you are to stay with us for months, perhaps years. We will next fully persuade ourselves that on your return no engagement will be forced on you, and that some fortuitous chain of events may render your marriage with Dr. Edouard possible; and lastly, we will feel certain that so long as you have to be at the Schloss I shall obtain permission to keep you company."

"How delightfully things come right in your mind always, dear Hilda!"

"Things were never intended to go wrong in the world," was the reply. "If we all knew exactly what we were about, and what we ought to be about, everybody's life would run as smoothly as on wheels. And now I will fetch your coffee."

CHAPTER IV.

A WEEK after the girlish confabulation that mellow October afternoon, the first flakes of snow fell on the distant hills, yet a week later the South-German winter had set in with more than usual force. The far-off mountain ranges glittered in the sun, the pastures were one vast wilderness of snow, the forest trees groaned under their heavy load, and the frozen lakes and rivers would have borne the passage of an army. The sky and earth had been metamorphosed as if by magic; that brilliant speckless vault of azure overhead, that dazzling asbestine globe below, having little in common with the leaden heavens and dull brown earth of yesterday. There was a grandiose element in the winter aspect of this Suabian landscape, which in summer it wholly wanted. Unsightly spots were veiled over, turgid pools transformed into glassy sheets, even the squalid tenement of the peasant was softened and dignified by its white vesture.

All was splendid, solemn, yet exhilarating to the young and robust, at least, it could but be so. The winter meant to them an accession of animal spirits, induced by the excitement of skating and its attendant socialities. It meant also a greater degree of freedom from conventional trammels, and all kinds of enjoyment impossible at any other season of the year. Severe monitors in the form of stern grandparents or guardians vanish from the scene, as if by magic also, with the first rude pinch of frost. Frau Anna, after the fashion

of elderly folks in those parts, immediately retired to her chamber, where, putting up her inner windows, she resigned herself to a kind of hybernation till the spring, then to emerge as alert and vigorous as before.

To the poor trembling Hildegarde, every flake of snow wore the guise of a guardian fairy. She knew that the inroad of winter meant security for her. Remote from the court, remote from a railway, remote from any centre of civilisation, she was safe at least for a time. She might breathe freely till the snow melted.

"Pray do come in, Dr. Edouard," said Hilda to the young physician, as, furred to the chin, he appeared in the midst of a tremendous snowstorm to ask after his patient.

Dr. Edouard hesitated modestly. His somewhat satirical, biting humour seemed sobering down. He looked almost shy, almost wanting Hilda's encouragement.

"Come in," reiterated Hilda, sharply, delighted to have her turn at domineering, feeling indeed that her hour of triumph was come as far as Dr. Edouard was concerned—"or" (here she laughed with great sauciness), "I shut the door upon you once and for all. But your patient expects you, I daresay."

Dr. Edouard blushed an honest, manly blush.

"Nay, that cannot be," he replied, "for she is now quite well, and I have no excuse for coming at all."

"You can invent a very plausible one, I have no doubt," Miss Hilda said, helping him off with his fur coat with a half-sisterly friendliness. Then he unfastened his leggings and followed her into the parlour,

Hilda flinging open the door wide to announce him, then shutting it again.

For half a second, however, she put in her pretty head to say in the most matter-of-fact manner,

"Excuse me, dearest Hildegarde" (she was fully at liberty to drop obsequious titles in Dr. Edouard's presence—love, in her eyes, making them both nobodies!), "but my ham pickle is on the fire; it must be stirred every moment. Were Dr. Edouard about to amputate a limb I could not just attend now."

With that she darted back to her ham-pickling in the huge kitchen, singing to the top of her voice over her work, giving as much audible account of herself as she could. "Men think so meanly of women," she thought, "at least Dr. Edouard does. He may imagine me listening at the door."

It was little that a stealthy listener would have got for his pains just then. Young lovers, as a rule, are the reverse of eloquent. Dr. Edouard, for the first time, felt strangely ill at ease when he now found himself alone with Hildegarde. Hitherto she had been in his eyes only a fair, clinging, grateful girl; to-day a certain undefinable something reminded him of her rank. Hildegarde's overwhelming shyness forced her into a reserve he might well at the first blush take for pride.

"I have come, but I must come no more," he said at last, standing before the trembling figure, so fair in its winter habiliment of dark-green fur-bordered cloth; "I ought not to have come to-day."

Hildegarde sat with folded hands, quivering lips, and down-dropt eyelids, from which the tears soon began to steal slowly down.

"Forgive me," he began; then realising the meaning of her measured welcome, and felling compelled by the sight of her tears to resume the old playful authoritativeness, he added, "I have been wrong, and you not wholly free from blame. Why did you not tread me under foot? Why did you not treat me like a base-born underling?"

He had used the strongest epithets he could think of, and the exaggerated phrase, combined with an irresistible desire to console, made him bend towards her smilingly. The sympathy born of youth and love would have its way. Neither knew how it was, but in a moment their secret was told without a word, and he was kissing away her tears!

"I have told Hilda," said Hildegarde, after a time. "We must trust her in everything."

"It would be hard to do otherwise," was the reply.

"Oh! have no fear where Hilda is concerned; she loves me better than anything in the world, and is loyalty itself."

"That I never doubted, but she must rule;" here the young doctor laughed. "Well, we are entirely in her hands, so we are bound to let Fräulein Hilda do with us as she will."

And true enough, having left the lovers as she thought long enough together, Hilda, with preliminary warnings, now dashed in, saying, as she took in the situation at a glance,

"Dr. Edouard, will you please take us on the ice as soon as the snowstorm is well over? I have ordered," (here she glanced significantly at Hildegarde, as much as to say that in the eyes of all present she was a princess no longer), "I have ordered Hildegarde some

skates. She declares that she is a poor skater. We must instruct her."

Dr. Edouard took very kindly to Hilda's way of looking at things.

"With pleasure. The skating season promises to be superb, and the exercise is the very thing for, for —her," he stammered.

"Why not say Hildegarde, and have done with it?" said Miss Hilda, sharply. "She is Hildegarde to you and to me, is she not?"

And, saying that, she took her foster-sister's hand protectingly in her own.

"Shall it be so?" Dr. Edouard asked, turning to the happy girl beside him.

"Well, let it be so as long as the ice lasts, anyhow," Hilda added; and then all three entered gaily into their skating projects. Dr. Edouard and Hilda were glorious skaters, and up to this time it had only been as a skater that she tolerated her somewhat sarcastic neighbour. The pair soon became friendly on the ice, and would occasionally perform beautiful feats to the delight of the staring village-folk. It was now decided that, for the sake of giving Hildegarde freer enjoyment of the pastime, they should not skate immediately under the eyes of gossipy acquaintances, but go farther afield, about two miles off; and what was a four miles' walk to two young girls in robust health? Shut in by gently sloping hills lay a lakelet they were pretty sure of having to themselves. Here, at least for the present, they determined to indulge in the incomparable sport, and for days before the first essay both girls were busy in preparing their dresses.

"The dresses shall be both alike, and I will tell

you why," Hilda said, as the two girls stood lost in admiration before a pile of rich-coloured cloths, conveniently brought to the door by a pedlar. In those out-of-the-way villages indeed, removed as they were from anything to be called a town by a long day's stage-coach journey, the spirit of coquetry would be extinguished altogether. Many rustic beauties never did their shopping in any other way, and were thus tolerably well supplied with the fashions of capitals. The first note of the siskin in the woods, the first bud of waxen green, brought the welcome pedlar and his pack to the doors of his pretty customers; and just when the gay summer gowns and straw hats were being put aside, lo! he would appear again, bringing warm furs, beaver hats, scarlet stockings, and beautiful birds' feathers, not to speak of homelier commodities for the old and rheumatic.

To-day he had brought an unwonted variety of those soft, glossy, warm-hued cloths Eastern travellers are accustomed to admire in the costume of their dragomans, having no idea that they are in reality manufactured in Saxony more especially for Oriental markets. Sky-blues, rich plum-colour, olive-green, delicious cinnamon-brown, the peculiarly rich orange seen in wings of certain tropic birds, and deepest velvety purple, all were now displayed to the bewildered Hilda and her companion.

"The dresses shall be both alike," repeated Hilda, when the pedlar had quitted them for a few moments in search of a forgotten pack. "We are very nearly of a size and of the same stature. Our hair is precisely the same colour, and our features those of twin sisters. By being dressed precisely in the same manner,

we shall be better able to confuse people as to our identity. With your veil drawn, I am sure even Kurt, the herd-boy, might take you for me. You see, dearest Hildegarde, it will be so mightily convenient for us sometimes to pass off for one another. But more of that by and by. Now for the choice."

After an unusual amount of deliberation, Hilda decided—it was ever Hilda who decided everything—for the most piquant, bewitching combination of colours in the world. The dresses must not be too conspicuous, that was understood; but they must be becoming and appropriate. So the richest, glossiest, most feathery-coloured green was chosen, to be bordered with white grebe's wings, "in order to make us," Miss Hilda said, "look like lovely birds skimming over the lake." How could she help knowing that she was lovely? There was no kind of vanity in the speech, only the gratitude of an appreciative spirit.

The pedlar paid and dismissed, Hilda set to work, Hildegarde helping in the humblest, most obsequious way. Every German girl learns to make her gowns as a matter of course, and Hilda was not likely to be behindhand in an art so important to her appearance and well-being. For let cynics sneer; the well-dressed woman has ever a thousand more chances of success in worldly matters than the unfortunate wretch who has never learned how to tie her bonnet-strings.

In a week the snowstorm was over, the exquisite garments ready, and the happy trio started for their first expedition on the lake.

CHAPTER V.

NEVER was such a season of matchless, measureless enjoyment! Winter to these three was shorn of all its terrors, and they revelled in it, and exuberated in it with almost selfish abandonment. They felt as if they were no longer responsible human beings, with cares already on their shoulders and problems awaiting them to solve in the future. They seemed rather gleesome, reckless spirits, breathing in pleasure only—pleasure born of the senses, not of the intellect. As they skimmed those glassy fields with fantastic gyrations, each fell under a different enchantment. With Hilda, an added sense of power formed the chief element of delight. Her skating, ever admirable, had now become superb, and the consciousness of attainments, quite as much as their effect upon others, intoxicated her with pleasure. The conviction of unusual capacity, cleverness, call it what we will, seemed ever to open new vistas of enjoyment and fields for enterprise.

“Yes,” thought the ambitious girl, as, like some bird-like thing, she flew whither her fancy led; “yes, I feel sure that I am not destined to an ignoble, narrow existence. I can, I must, find full play for my abilities, and free scope for my powers. Who knows but that Hildegarde may take me back with her to court, and then——”

After that climax everything seemed attainable to her quick mind. She generously wanted her foster-

sister to be happy in her own way, to be forgotten by her august kinsfolk, to marry Dr. Edouard. But, as such a chain of circumstances seemed far removed from likelihood, it savoured of no unkindness to make projects more in accordance with her own wishes. Dr. Edouard, need it be said, revelled also in a new sense of power, but of a wholly different kind from that which dazzled Hilda. Here it was the man's sense of supremacy, the lover's domination, that came into full play. Like many another man of peculiarly decided and tenacious character, he was bewitched by Hildegard's very softness and gentleness, underneath which, however, lay a world of resolute passion and tenderness. But it was a passion that centred in one object only. Dr. Edouard's mastery over this clinging nature was complete, whilst her very love for him and leaning on him awoke in her a new and unsuspected strength. Hildegard felt that love might make her "strong unto death." Whilst her imperious young foster-sister therefore skimmed the ice with all kinds of daring fancies flashing through her brain, whilst her still more imperious lover, yet gentleness and almost feminine devotion itself to her, proudly and defiantly took his part in the mazy whirl, feeling that if destiny were not good enough for him, at least he might prove a match for destiny, Hildegard's thoughts were bound within a much narrower compass.

"Oh," she thought, "if I might but change places with Hilda for once and for all! If she would only accept my lot, which is so much more suited to her than to me, and in the guise of Frau Anna's granddaughter marry Dr. Edouard! What harm could come of such an exchange?"

"You might at least take my place for a time," said Hilda, one day, when these fancies had been uttered aloud. "It is not impossible, as I have said before, that you may be once more forgotten for six years. In that case, as soon as you become of age, you might do as you please, the only possible penalty being that you would of course forfeit your rank. Mind, I am looking very far ahead here; we must hardly hope for such good fortune, although it may happen. But, in the meantime, why should you not really believe that it is to be so, and act accordingly?"

Hildegarde opened wide her large, soft, pathetic eyes.

"As soon as the spring comes," Hilda continued, "my grandmother's hybernation will be over, and she will go and pay her usual visit to my uncle Conrad in the Tyrol, far away; Kurt, the herdsman, will take the cows up to the Alps to pasture; none will be left here but Gretel and me. When Dr. Edouard has his usual holiday, who will be the wiser if you pay a visit to his mother and sisters as Fräulein Hilda, and are introduced to them as his betrothed?"

"It would be too felicitous," Hildegarde answered, all kinds of visions already flashing before her mind; "too exquisite, too happy."

"As you are so immoderately in love with Dr. Edouard," Hilda answered, not able to hide a touch of almost contemptuous astonishment, "it would be very pleasant to make the acquaintance of his family; and certainly they all seem to adore him. He must be a good son and brother, however disagreeable——" She broke into a merry laugh, and gave her foster-sister an apologetic kiss.

"Disagreeable he has been to me, you cannot deny it. But we are talking of his mother and sisters, who, judging from their fetters and all the things they knit for him, must regard him as a paragon. There you would see Dr. Edouard in his home, you would—passing off, of course, as Fräulein Hilda—realise exactly the life in store for you if you marry him, and he in his turn——" She made a little grimace, and added, "he might, as he calls it, improve your mind, teach you botany, read Goethe to you, and so on."

"Oh, Hilda! Will you let me do it? Will you manage everything?"

"Never fear; and really, little goose, there is absolutely nothing to manage. Dr. Edouard's mother and sisters have, up to within a few months, lived in Hanover. They have no idea of what I am like. You will find it easy and natural to pass off for me; and my part of princess will only need to be acted before Gretel!"

"Gretel must know then?"

"Gretel must know, but she is my bond-slave. I can bind her over to a promise that no terror and no threat would cause her to break."

"It is wonderful how you can influence people, and impose your will upon them," cried Hildegarde, admiringly.

"What is each of us but a Will?" replied Hilda.

To this metaphysical speech Hildegarde found no reply. She could not trace it to its root, not having, like her friend, read Schopenhauer. But she could understand it in its practical application. Hilda—well, yes, she was certainly a Will; Dr. Edouard—he also was nothing but the living expression of a Will; and

for herself, was not this love for him, so deep, so passionate, so inrooted, taking also the shape of a Will?

The substance of this little dialogue was of course repeated by Hildegarde to her lover, and he readily assented to the proposal.

"Gentle as you are, all too devoted to me as you are," he said, looking fondly into her responsive eyes, "your master in one sense, I am yet your bond-slave in another. I do feel some compunction in so far deceiving my good mother and sisters, also your own relatives, though, of a truth, they have not deserved much dutifulness from you. It goes against my conscience to wear a mask, yet your consent, your affection, compel."

"But I must never lead you into doing the least little thing you know to be wrong," she said, trying to shake off the witchery, the glamour of those terribly passionate kisses, those probing looks. "No, Edouard, shun me if it is so."

"Nay," he said, and for a brief moment held her to his heart, overcome by a mood that brought tears into his eyes and incoherent whispers to his lips; "I intended indeed to imply no such meaning. I succumb, but I remain my own master. If you were drawing me towards destruction, and I loved you, were it possible, even more devotedly, I should fly from you, and never allow myself to behold your face again."

He now placed a chair for her, and, sitting down, went on in his usual manner.

"You should know, Hildegarde, for once and for all, why, with regard to your relations, and your obligations to them, I seem to take an extraordinary, and, it may seem, an indefensible standpoint. Mind,

I do not aver that I am justified in so judging the matter, but it does seem to me a case for individual discernment, and not for any absolute rule. I consider, then, that those whose name you bear, and who are legally responsible for your well-being, have forfeited all claims on your respect and obedience by their unexampled conduct."

"They are but visiting my poor mother's sins upon my head," replied Hildegarde, sorrowfully; "she was never forgiven for her marriage."

"That but makes their neglect more shameful," he retorted; "an orphan, the child of a discommended marriage, brotherless, sisterless, it was their duty to cherish and foster you. But,"—here he smiled one of those deeply sarcastic smiles for which Hildegarde had occasionally all but hated him—"but I have no love of royal and ducal personages, as you know, and the root of my disapprobation goes far deeper than the personal resentment with which your case has inspired me. I am at heart a Socialist—rather, a democrat. I see the words do not scare you; you are ignorant of their meaning. When you come to stay with us I will explain the meaning of those puzzling words."

"You think I may do as Hilda proposes, then?" asked the tremblingly happy Hildegarde.

"Why not?" he replied, stooping down to press his lips once more to those fond eyes. "Hilda but proposes a jest—at least we will so regard it."

The young physician's apparent nonchalance covered a real conviction. Schooled in the ideas of certain Socialist teachers of the day, he regarded sovereignty and all privileges of rank with more than cynical indifference. To his thinking they were sheer artifi-

cialities, mere survivals of a state of things about to pass away for ever, no more exacting deference or loyalty than obsolete laws can exact obedience. Provided therefore that Hildegarde, having attained her majority, should consent to marry him, he could conceive of no blame thereby incurred either on his part or on hers.

He was not prepared to sacrifice one iota of his happiness, or that of anyone dear to him, to such empty figments as birth and rank. And further, he was prepared, when the crisis had come, to stand by Hildegarde to the utmost, and to induce her to act from the same motive. At present, however, he wished to disturb her by no inner conflicts of this kind; time enough for her to choose when the momentous choice should be necessary!

CHAPTER VI.

REASON as he might, however, Dr. Edouard, like many a strong-willed man, was led by a volition more tenacious than his own. He had not the slightest notion how far Hilda was influencing him where Hildegarde was concerned and how inevitably Hilda was enclosing him in a charmed circle from which there would be soon no escape. In the slight girlish form indeed breathed one of those commanding spirits and imposing wills that are more often found in the other sex. She only wanted occasion to exercise right royally her natural endowments, and meantime must work upon such material as came to hand. There were countless little opportunities for swaying this happy lover to her purpose. Was it natural, was it probable, that Dr. Edouard should resist when his inclinations all pointed the same way. So Hilda now ruled him almost as supremely as the ever-pliant Gretel, and gloried in her triumph. This satirical, biting, dominating young doctor must find subjects elsewhere. The tables were turned, and it involved on her to give orders and express commands. Hildegarde's lover was hopelessly, irrevocably in her power.

The superb winter was over, vanished, as it had come, like a dream and in a moment. So, at least, it seemed. No sooner were the snows melted than the balmy spring was breathing pleasantness over the land. Flowers cropped up among the waxen blades, the sun

shone forth dazzlingly, the woods were alive with song. In these rustic places the change was as noticeable in human affairs, here regulated by the season. With the sweet April-tide Frau Anna descended from her warm winter biding-place under the thatch and permitted herself to be packed up and despatched on her usual summer visit to grandchildren far away. With the first melting of the snows, Kurt, the herdsman, was sent to the neighbouring Alps, there to mind the herds till the autumn, and all kinds of busy outdoor life began among the peasant folk, whether in the high pasture grounds or in the valley. People were all too busy with their own affairs to have any time for gossiping about their neighbours; so, at least, Hilda persuaded her grandmother. Nor did there seem the slightest reason to apprehend disturbance from the grand folks at the palace; their waif seemed forgotten altogether, as she had been forgotten in her childhood.

Nothing, therefore, stood in the way of Hilda's plans, and she set to work to carry them out with such energy that one might have supposed her very existence depended on success. What really depended on the scheme seemed only a brief spell of happiness to the lovers, but Hilda looked farther ahead. Already vague dreams of the most fantastic kind were floating through her brain, brighter far than any realities of the day's bringing. And she also realised the necessity of success from a material point of view. If things were managed badly, if the secret of Hildegarde's visit ever came out, there could be no doubt of the ducal displeasure taking an unwelcome shape. Perhaps even Frau Anna's pension would be withdrawn!

"Mind, I rely on your caution," she said to her

foster-sister, as the pair stood at the window watching for Dr. Edouard and the stage-coach that was to convey the lovers into fairyland. "Dr. Edouard, I know"—here she spoke with an expression of almost contemptuous recognition—"Dr. Edouard will not be weak, and will keep his presence of mind; but I am not so sure of you, Hildegarde."

"Fear nothing," was the reply, "I could not trust myself were I the author of this scheme. But it is you who risk everything in order to give me a little happiness, and I promise never to betray you—never."

"I hope not," Hilda said, kissing her with her grandest air, "and here comes Dr. Edouard looking more superior than ever. Good-bye! Heaven bless you, my children!"

The stage-coach was at the garden gate, and Hildegarde, travelling bag in hand, dying with impatience to be off. It seemed to her as if at the last moment something would surely happen to prevent this blissful departure. Hilda and Dr. Edouard, however pressed for time, must find a moment for their little passage of arms. Although on the best possible terms, not a single day passed without such an encounter.

"I am really sorry to leave you behind," he said.

"And I am so delighted to see the last of you—at least for a time," was the reply. "If you knew how tired I have been of you both lately!"

"Do not suppose you have succeeded in concealing the fact. But, Hilda," here he took her hand with genuine, hearty friendliness, "pray believe that I am grateful to you, my best friend in the world. Pray believe also that if"—again his brown eyes twinkled

mischievously—"if we are all brought up like culprits to the bar, I will let the blame fall on no weak woman's shoulders."

"I thank you," cried Hilda, darting vicious glances at him from her bright eyes. "My deeds are my own; I want no advocate, least of all in you—Dr. Edouard."

But the postboy blew his horn impatiently; there was no time for Dr. Edouard to retort. The foster-sisters embraced each other most affectionately, and Hilda repeated—

"Once more, adieu! Be as discreet as you say and as happy as you desire. Heaven bless you, my children!"

The pair walked down the garden. Dr. Edouard, already compelled to act a part, now turned to bow bare-headed and obsequious to the young lady by the window, whilst he gave a careless hand to the blue-veiled figure beside him.

Then the yellow-jacketed postboys cracked their whips and the cumbersome old vehicle laboured on, up hill and down hill, *bergab und bergauf*, as the German phrase goes, through fields of virgin green, the orchards all ablossom with pears and plums, the vineyards showing tenderest waxen leaf. And never in its days had this old stage-coach borne two lighter hearts than those of the young physician and his betrothed. Spring reigned over the world and in their own breasts. Were this summer holiday but a chance joy-gift of Hilda's giving, or a jest destined to be fateful, they never asked. Enough for them, perhaps even too much of joyousness, the long long hours of the present! When the last glimpse of the stage-coach had vanished from

sight, Hilda summoned Gretel the dairymaid, and now her sole companion.

"Now," she began, in her most awe-inspiring manner, "you have not much intelligence, it is true, my poor Gretel. You confess yourself, do you not, that you are terribly, almost hopelessly stupid. But you can always understand *me*."

"Oh yes, Fräulein."

Gretel's answer betokened the absolute sway wielded by her young mistress, not only over her will but over her wits. Nothing could be truer than the answer. Gretel did always understand Hilda; and why? Simply because she dared not do otherwise. Fear imparted a lucidity to this dull thinking machine that would have had something miraculous about it but for the same kind of thing seen among the lower animals. Very possibly there are many problems within the reach of the commonest intelligence were some sufficiently powerful fulcrum put into motion.

"Oh yes, Fräulein!" repeated the magnetised Gretel, waiting with eyes, ears, and mouth wide open to take in the coming mandate.

Hilda paused, perusing the coarse yet wholesome physiognomy before her with an undisguised expression of both approval and disgust. Gretel's brute-like submission delighted her, but her woodenness was all the same unpardonable.

"Mind," she began, in that collected, matter-of-fact way which made such threats doubly appalling, "it is on your peril that you do not understand me now. Our safety, nay, our very existence, not only yours and mine, but my grandmother's, and even Kurt's there on the Alps, depends entirely on your discretion."

"Yes, Fräulein," was all that Gretel dared utter.

"It must be yes indeed. Listen, Gretel, I will make everything as plain to you as A B C. It is not the Countess Hildegarde who has just gone on a visit to Dr. Edouard's mother and sisters, it is I, Hilda, Frau Anna's grand-daughter. Do you comprehend that, my poor dunner-head?"

"Yes, Fräulein," still repeated Gretel. Sobs of dismay were rising in her throat all the time, but for the life of her she dared not resist this dread yet incomparable young sovereign.

"And I, who stay behind, I am not Hilda, I am the Countess Hildegarde. As long as she stays away I am she and not myself. Do you take it in?"

"Oh, Fräulein," groaned Gretel, fairly broken down by the weight of this metaphysical problem; "oh, Fräulein!"

No appeal for pity could have been more childishly, abjectly intense, but it fell on Hilda's ear as idly as if never uttered.

"Your duty is narrowed to a point," she went on. "With the whys and wherefores, the rights and wrongs of the case, you have nothing whatever to do. My part is to direct, yours to obey. I alone am responsible."

Gretel listened mute.

"You have to address me as the countess, to regard me as the countess in every matter, trifling as well as important. If you confuse our identities, if you make a muddle of the affair, we are lost, we are undone. We shall be tried before a court of justice, condemned to long terms of imprisonment, perhaps to perpetual labour in the mines, even to decapitation."

Gretel fairly sobbed aloud now, but Hilda showed that she intended to remain firm as a rock.

"It is quite useless for you to attempt to work on my feelings, Gretel; the thing is done and cannot be undone. It is impossible for the countess to be in two places at once. It suits her pleasure to go, mine to stay; and I repeat, the responsibility of the transfer is ours, not yours."

Gretel sobbed on.

"Now, Gretel, please to leave off that child's play and listen," Hilda pursued, sternly. "There is nothing to cry about. At this time of the year everyone is up on the Alps. We are quite safe from prying neighbours. Most likely no one will come to the house at all before the Princess's return—I mean my return, you know; but, if such should be the case, you know what you are to do."

Gretel stared aghast.

"You are to address me as the Princess. You are to say absolutely nothing if questions are put to you; nothing, you understand, not so much as yes or no. And now I cannot waste another word on the subject. Come with me to the spice-cupboard, and I will give out the necessary stores for the next few weeks."

Gretel followed, wiping her eyes, in an abject state of submissiveness, and Hilda, airily mounting a high pair of steps, proceeded to catalogue the various articles that she now dropped one by one into Gretel's wide-spread apron.

"The sugar-loaf—mind your head," cried the young lady, not disposed to waste much time over the business; "candles, tea, coffee, mixed spice, split peas, salt and vinegar for the sour kraut, dried camomiles if we

have the mumps, feverfew for bleeding of the nose, lily leaves for broken heads or knees, my grandmother's pet remedy for the bite of a mad dog; well, really I begin to think we have thought of everything! But exercise your wits, my good Gretel; once these doors are locked, neither for love nor money will they be opened again. Can you think of anything else? Oh, yes, the dried sausages!"

Down went a huge string of dried sausages, followed by two or three equally huge pots of jam.

"Now, Gretel," cried Hilda, ready to lock the cupboard and descend, "have I forgotten anything?"

"What about the wash, Fräulein; soap, soda, bluing, Fräulein?" said Gretel, with great alacrity, the prospective wash out of doors wearing an unusual fascination in her eyes just then.

"I am not Fräulein Hilda," Hilda replied, hiding her amusement under a guise of irritation. "In case of an emergency, you could say it as a matter of course, so pray cure yourself of the habit and say Gnädiges Fräulein at once."

"And the starch, Gnädiges Fräulein," Gretel said, terror getting the better of her reluctance.

Hilda gave out the starch, closed the door of the cupboard, and locked it with a jerk. Then, descending from her pinnacle, she feigned a sneeze in order to hide her laughter, adding as soon as she had recovered herself.

"Very good. If you go on as you have begun, I shall be quite pleased with you, Gretel. But with regard to the wash? No, no more washing, soap-sudding, steaming, mangling, and hanging out to dry for you just yet, my good Gretel. You are no longer

a maid-of-all-work, but my attendant, remember, and must immediately tidy up the house, clean yourself, put on your best clothes, and sit down to your spinning-wheel in the parlour."

Gretel looked on the verge of another outbreak, but Hilda's deprecatory gesture and commanding frown immediately checked the impulse. She obeyed with the docility of an automaton set in motion.

CHAPTER VII.

ALL went well that day, but in the early hours of the following morning Hilda's peaceful slumbers were disturbed by loud cries from Gretel outside. Now, Hilda was not a young lady subject to sudden alarms. It must be something very unusual indeed to ruffle her really fine self-possession or to startle her fearless mind. But these terrified screams of Gretel, who had been drilled into a decent show of composure under trying circumstances, did for the moment affright her. So, throwing on a long white dressing-gown, she hastily opened the door, there to find Gretel crouched on the floor, white with terror, her teeth chattering, and every limb atremble.

Hilda's presence of mind was of course quite equal to the emergency.

"My good Gretel," she said, in a voice that was at the time keenly remonstrative yet inspiriting, even kindly; "my good Gretel, the house is not burnt down. We are both alive and well. There is no murderer behind you."

"Fräulein! oh, Fräulein!" was all the girl could utter, catching hold of her young mistress's skirts, still a prey to the most abject terror. "Oh, Fräulein! it is there—there."

She pointed in the direction of the little parlour below. Hilda, without a word, prepared to descend.

"Oh, Fräulein! I must go with you," Gretel cried,

dazed at this supreme exhibition of intrepidity, and thereby inspired to an act of heroism in spite of herself.

The pair descended, Hilda a trifle pale but drawn to her full height and braced up for the deadliest encounter, Gretel following, cowed to the earth, and clutching her young lady's garment.

On the threshold she drew back again, overcome with fear.

"Oh, Fräulein! Heaven help us! All good angels save us!" she cried; "the ghost! the ghost!"

Light was now beginning to dawn upon Hilda's mind; but, not yet fully reassured, she pressed forward imperiously and threw wide the door. A minute later, and Gretel's loud shrieks for angelic compassion were drowned by peal after peal of merry laughter from the now enlightened Hilda.

"Really, Gretel," she said, as soon as she had partially recovered herself, "your cravenness is past all bearing. Before you allowed yourself to be half frightened out of your senses, why did you not go up and touch the ghost as you call it. The truth would then have immediately flashed upon you. But it is really a wonderful illusion; my grandmother to the life!"

"What is it, then, Fräulein, if neither a ghost nor Frau Anna? Oh! what is it?"

A more clear-sighted observer than Gretel might well indeed have put the same question, and with as much perplexity. For there, in her favourite alcove by the window, her face covered with a silk handkerchief after the manner of old folk drowsing, her hands crossed in her lap, her whole attitude that of

peaceful after-dinner slumber, sat dame Anna, or, if not dame Anna, a figure bearing her very image.

For a moment or two Hilda was too much absorbed in the contemplation of her handiwork to pay any heed to Gretel's ejaculations. Then, perfectly composed, she went up to the figure, and pursing up her pretty lips as she was wont to do when seriously meditating, put a finishing touch here, adjusted a line of drapery there, moving back each time to note the effect.

"How could you be so idiotic as to wake me up at four o'clock in the morning for nothing, and to put yourself in such a fright too? Where were your reasoning powers? where was your imagination?" she said.

She now triumphantly drew aside the black gown and displayed to the shrinking, shrieking Gretel the legs and feet of her lay-figure.

"Do you not understand it all?" Hilda went on, with complete aplomb and no little impatience. "We are like people in a play; we are acting a part, and the whole thing being begun must be carried out without a hitch. Of course my grandmother would not have left the princess alone with me, nor has she done so in our little play. She is here, only she remains fast asleep. You go to the door, and tell me if the deception is not perfect."

Gretel had no words as yet at command and still trembled in every limb, so Hilda went to the door herself, and praised her own work, as there was no one else to utter a word of commendation. Seen from this point of distance, partly obscured by the green climbing plants German ladies love to have in their window-seats, partly by a screen apparently placed to

keep off the draught, the lay-figure dressed up in Frau Anna's clothes appeared her very self. Hilda, with that happy imitateness, as much a feature in her character as her unending sprightliness and gaiety, had in truth here performed little short of a miracle. So nicely had the characteristic pose been attained, so accurately the proportions, so skilful the management of light and shade, that there could be no fear of the illusion failing. Frau Anna taking her siesta was a fact evident to all.

"I am sorry I did not mention it to that poor dear stupid thing," was Hilda's reflection as she lay down for another hour's drowse. "But her fright is very satisfactory. For of course, if she is so completely imposed upon, others will be also."

Then she buried her face in the bed-clothes, and indulged in immoderate laughter at her latest exploit and the drollery of the situation. Sleep was absolutely impossible after having been once so fairly roused. She opened her eyes wide, indulged for a little while in waking dreams, then rose and performed her toilet.

After that ruffling incident, all went on smoothly. Gretel, it is true, did not dare to approach "Frau Anna," as she persisted in calling the lay-figure and its lendings, for days to come. It was neither a living thing nor its fictitious semblance to her, but some dread, eerie, horrifying go-between, a nameless, mysterious phantom whose riddle remained yet to be read. When at last a grand cleaning day occurred, and the spectre had to be taken to pieces in order to sweep out the alcove, Gretel's mind also underwent a complete cobwebbing. The automaton was an automaton and nothing more. Things now went so evenly

indeed, that but for Hilda's animation the place would have seemed in a drowse. The geese were far away under the charge of a little goose-girl. The cattle stalls were empty. Hardly a sound might be heard all day long but the drone of Gretel's spinning-wheel and the strains of Hilda's piano. Hilda having no monitory grandmother's eye upon her, and having made up her mind to play the part of princess, played it with a vengeance. She dressed herself very carefully on rising, performed no household duties whatever, and often sat down to her piano from her eight o'clock coffee till her twelve o'clock dinner. Then she got out her French and English school-books, and studied those languages with extraordinary application. "Who knows," she would say to herself, "but that Hildegarde may take me back to the court with her, and then I should have need of all my accomplishments?" When the mid-day meal was over, the two girls went into the garden and formed a pretty picture—Hilda in a white dress, reading or working beside a rustic table; Gretel smoothed, be-Sunday'd, as our French neighbours say, and beautified, sitting at her spinning-wheel. Around this little summer-house were flower-beds and fruit-trees, and from the open window could be seen the very semblance of stiff, old-fashioned propriety, the nodding figure of Frau Anna, in black dress, high black cap, and white kerchief crossed on her bosom.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MONTH had passed, the quietest possible, and Hilda and Gretel were getting quite used to their respective parts. Hilda, partly from a love of forming mazy plans and carrying them out, and partly from sheer girlish playfulness, would permit no infringement of the law originally laid down. It was "Gnädiges Fräulein" (gracious miss), as the obsequious Gretel invariably addressed her. She wore by mutual understanding, her foster-sister's clothes and trinkets, dressed her hair precisely after her fashion and adopted easily enough certain little mannerisms of the sweet yet not inimitable Hildegarde—modest flutterings, down-droppings of the eyelids, shy blushes, and low timid modulations of the voice. She had outwardly metamorphosed herself more completely than she was aware, and a very strong natural likeness had been thus heightened to a degree that well might have perplexed observers as to the identity of the two. The illusion, indeed, to use Hilda's words, was perfect, and it even began to take hold of her own mind.

When she had dressed, spoken and acted "as if she were not herself but another person for an unbroken period of weeks, she almost began to fancy that things were as they seemed—that Hilda, dame Anna's daughter, was away; that Hildegarde, the real Hildegarde, and at the same time herself, was here! Sometimes the thought would flash across her mind—

or rather, perhaps, it was a passing vagary, and nothing to be called a thought—"Are not these instincts that I feel, and not mere longings? And Hildegarde's also, her counter-passions and inclinations, do they not indicate inborn, inherent inherited character? Are we not changelings, and she it is who is grand-daughter of Frau Anna, the court wet-nurse; I who am the child of a prince and princess? Is it otherwise natural, is it likely that I should be thus drawn towards a life of splendour and domination, whilst she is no less prone to an obscure domestic position?"

Then alike her reverie and her reasoning would go off on another track, and she would put the question to her own mind, "If, indeed then, we are what we are, and not what we seem, if I am in reality peasant-born, and it is Hildegarde who comes of reigning sovereigns, then, seeing what freaks Nature has played with us both, fitting me for an exalted station, her for the very reverse, why should we not change parts on the stage of life? Why should I not take the place of princess, Hildegarde that of her peasant-born *sœur de lait*?"

Such fantastical dreams were of the moment only, mere dallyings with an idle fancy, and born of the girl's innate fay-like inkling after mischief. With all her practical good sense and superb cleverness she ever remained naïve and childlike in this respect, ready at a moment's warning to play pranks with persons and things.

These thoughts passed as they had come, a far safer and easier solution being afforded by more practical reflections. "All may yet be well," she said to herself, "if Hildegarde can be induced to act with

spirit and determination. She has only to return to the palace when summoned—taking me with her, of course—to refuse persistently any proposals of marriage. In time her union with Dr. Edouard might become feasible. He could be ennobled, and might have a title given him; then his happiness and that of my darling Hildegarde is secured; whilst for myself a few years at the court is all I want. My fate, provided circumstances are only favourable, may fairly be left in my own hands.”

With alternating reflections now psychological, visionary, and matter-of-fact, Hilda almost daily reviewed the state of affairs, which at the end of June remained precisely as they had been at the beginning of May.

Hildegarde was far too happy to return; Hilda permitted her to stay. It seemed, indeed, as if the young princess had become her own mistress by this time. Summer was passing, and no sign came from the proud Schloss far away. Hilda, taking her accustomed place in the summer-house these golden afternoons, would often wonder how much longer she should live in this world of dreams. It pleased her well to fancy herself a princess, to be daintily dressed from morning to night, and have nothing to do all day but play on the piano and instruct herself, or toy with delicate needlework.

She was nevertheless beginning to weary of this sameness, this isolation; she wanted a little varying of daily circumstance, above all, an audience.

“If only some one were here to make a picture of us, Gretel!” she said one day; “this bower of roses and honeysuckle, you in your Sunday gear by a

spinning-wheel, myself in white, arranging these lovely flowers. What a wasted subject!"

The playful thought was hardly uttered when the little garden gate clicked, and a man's figure, small, spare, and scrupulously dressed, was seen approaching them, as he drew near bowing again and again with ridiculous obsequiousness—at least, so it seemed to Hilda, who under the most startling circumstances ever realised the sportive side of things. How well she could mimic this preposterous little personage was her first thought as he advanced, hat in hand and bending low.

Glancing at the white-robed, girlish figure before him with evident admiration, he made a crowning obeisance, and said,

"I have surely the honour of addressing the Countess, the Princess Hildegarde?"

For an instant, and an instant only, Hilda lost presence of mind. She blushed, and stood mute and motionless. Her momentary embarrassment was, however, followed by the most charming smile in the world, and an assenting inclination of the pretty, beautifully-dressed head.

"But not the princess of years gone by," said the visitor, with a mixture of paternal kindness and old-fashioned gallantry. "It was a little shy, delicate girl, to whom the Hofrath von Benderberg offered bonbons in former days, and she must long since have forgotten her old friend?"

"Nay," Hilda said, holding out a beautiful white hand, which the old courtier pressed to his lips, "I should be ungrateful indeed, Herr Hofrath, if I could forget you!"

"My little services are repaid a thousandfold," rejoined the Hofrath; "and remember, princess, whatever happens, I am always your faithful friend and devoted servant."

"I am sure of it," replied Hilda, smiling sweetly.

She knew the Hofrath from hearsay quite well; Hildegarde had described him to her again and again.

"The same grateful heart! the same endearing simplicity!" cried the old gentleman. "It must be seven years or more since I had the pleasure of seeing you, for I went away immediately after your return; but I should have known the Princess Hildegarde anywhere, in spite of this amazing, this adorable change!"

"The country air and the affectionate care of my foster-parents have done much for me, I know," Hilda answered, engagingly as before. "I can never be grateful enough to the good Frau Anna;" here she pointed in the direction of the apparently sleeping duenna. "As you see, she is resting, and I cannot wake her."

The Hofrath took out his watch and started up.

"I have not a moment to bestow on these worthy people. My errand is with you."

He glanced at the obnoxious Gretel significantly. Now Gretel had all this time been a terrible thorn in Hilda's side, frowns and signs hitherto failing to put down that fixed stare or to make her move an inch from such unbecoming proximity. The whole transaction seemed to have turned Gretel's woodenness into stone. She stood at her spinning-wheel, eyes and mouth wide open, gasping as if for very breath.

Driven to despair, Hilda now called the Hofrath's

attention to a rose of unusual beauty in bloom close by, and whilst he was bent over it inhaling the fragrance, quietly and with inimitable dexterity, she took Gretel by the shoulders and turned her out of the garden.

The Hofrath, looking up to find Gretel gone, showed signs of relief.

"I have not a moment to spare, except to fulfil my errand," he said, "and am come to fetch you by the Grand Duke's command. The time for preparation is short, but your women will attend to everything. The post carriage is awaiting you; your attendants and baggage will be ready in two hours' time, and I have orders to meet you at the post-house at Ilmen, whither I go in advance to arrange everything."

"To-day—must it be to-day?" asked Hilda, taken aback.

"Indeed, Princess, such are the Grand Duke's wishes. We are to travel fast and reach the summer palace as early as may be. Unexpected circumstances necessitate your immediate recall. I can understand your hesitation, your reluctance——"

"The summons is startlingly abrupt, certainly," Hilda replied, her mind bent as she spoke on the problem before her.

"It is; I admit it. But," said the Hofrath encouragingly, "you will soon grow accustomed to your new life, which, I may venture to prognosticate, will be a brilliant one. Friends and flatterers you will soon have enough and to spare. Do not forget your old servant among them all."

"That I could never do."

The Hofrath dropped his voice almost to a whisper.

"Who knows but that the little girl to whom I was permitted to give bonbons may be able at some time or other to prove my greatest benefactor? But pardon my indiscretion, Princess; and my carriage waits at the foot of the hill. I must be gone."

Once more he bent low over Hilda's outstretched hand, and a few minutes later she heard the distant sound of carriage wheels on the high road below. He was gone, and there was no choice for her. She must follow!

For a moment indeed the dauntless Hilda paused before bending her mind to the practical business in hand. But for a moment only, and without the shadow of an indecision clouding her mind. The deed was of her doing, and she would share the responsibility of it with no one.

"And after all," said the light-hearted, audacious girl, "exchange is no robbery. Why may we not be happily fated by a jest?"

CHAPTER IX.

MEANTIME the gentle maiden playing her brilliant namesake's part was growing to full mental and bodily stature under the sunny influence of sympathy. That blossoming of a woman's nature, only awaiting adequateness of outer as well as inner circumstances, was now hers, and, like the real Hilda far away, she for the first time felt in her right place, although clothed with another's lendings. This quiet affectionate home-life, this kindly mother's love warming all, these gay, busy girls contributing their share to the family purse by cheerful earnings, the thousand and one pleasant little nothings making up the sum total of every day, all filled her with satisfaction and delight. At last too she was beginning to rejoice in the sense of a precious personality. Hitherto she had been necessary to none, for want of opportunity, unable to endear herself to any living soul by womanly services and devotion, the loneliest woman-creature, as it seemed, under God's heaven. Now she was filling a place, and like a flower transported to a genial soil, new warm life tingled to the very roots of her nature.

But above all it was the deeper feeling for Dr. Edouard that had worked a gradual, and, as it seemed to Hildegarde herself, a miraculous transformation. This intense sympathy with another and wholly different and stronger nature, their intercommunion of closest thoughts, their fond clinging one to another, so

that it seemed impossible for them to live apart; such things were mysteries to the hitherto timid, shrinking girl. But even more than her lover's passion, did her own astonish her now. She could understand now the martyrdoms and heroic self-sacrifices of historic women. She felt conscious of a tenacity of will and purpose born of love, not to be shaken by any human opposition, however unscrupulously manifested.

Richly endowed natures have ever two selves, an indoor and an outer, and Hildegarde hardly knew which she loved best, the Dr. Edouard of the study and the fireside, or the Dr. Edouard of the forest and the Alp. Whenever he came to her with an invitation for a ramble, she knew that a little world of joyous experiences was in store. Whenever the day was to be spent at home, she felt an equal certainty of blissful impressions.

One morning early he bade her prepare for a long day's holiday excursion, with such beaming yet mysterious looks that she could but feel some unusual enjoyment was in store for both.

"Come," he said, taking the book from her willing hands, "no more English grammar to-day. Quick! your hat, your alpenstock, your little basket of provisions for two! I am going to take you to see my native village among the Alps yonder, and it will be twilight ere we return."

In a very few minutes all was ready, and the pair set off in the exuberant frame of mind young lovers know. Everything delighted the untravelled Hildegarde; the drive in a rustic vehicle over the green hills, the flower-gathering by the way, the walk through the forest, finally, the sight of Dr. Edouard's native

village nestling amid the pine-clad ridges. Within sight and hearing of the village her companion paused, and bade her sit down in a little sunny glade he seemed to know well. Then with an air of mystery he took a traveller's horn from his pocket and blew it loudly.

"We are expected," he said, smiling to see her expectancy. "I have a little surprise in store for you, as you shall now see."

And a second and a third time he blew that little Alpine horn, which sounded deep and clear through the noonday stillness of the forest. Hildegarde was about to speak, but he raised his finger, and in obedience to the sign she looked and listened.

On a sudden the golden vistas became alive with bright dancing figures, and the warm sultry silence was broken by the singing of sweet girlish voices. Looking round, Hildegarde saw a troop of peasant girls, some of them mere children, wearing the gay Sunday gear of the place, and laden with Alpine garlands and flowers which they scattered as they sang.

When the last apparition had descended the little sunlit path bending to the glade, they all surrounded Dr. Edouard and his companion, and performed a rustic "round" or village dance, accompanied by a monotonous but pleasing chorus.

"This is my birthday," said Dr. Edouard, in a low voice, "and it has reached the ears of my village folk that to-day I should bring my betrothed with me. Why I am always so *fêted* here, I will tell you afterwards. But listen to what they sing."

Hildegarde blushed and smiled as she caught the import of the words. It was, indeed, a rustic song,

wont to be sung at betrothals, and, in accordance with a time-honoured custom, accompanied by the strewing of flowers.

Dr. Edouard, familiar with the usages of the country, now sank upon one knee in the midst of the singers, and motioned to Hildegarde to do the same. Kneeling thus, they were soon becrowned and besprinkled with freshly-gathered flowers, whilst, as a benison of even deeper purpose, sounded the following refrain:—

“Plighted loves with linkèd hands
Knit we now in fairy bands;
Flowery chains, for love’s dear sake,
None shall sever, none shall break.”

These words roughly give the meaning of a charming and highly poetic song used to be sung on such occasions in the dialect of these isolated mountain villages. When the last couplet had been sung, or rather chanted, and the last posy scattered, Dr. Edouard rose, and smilingly helped his companion to rise from the ground. They were both covered with blossoms of edelweiss and other Alpine flowers as with snow. He shook off the fairy burden, and Hildegarde did the same, stooping to gather some for her bosom and her hair. Dr. Edouard also placed a little bouquet in his button-hole. Then addressing a few cordial words to the naïve choristers in his own name and that of his bride-elect, and dropping silver coins into the palms of the little ones, he dismissed them.

Hildegarde watched them disappear with the fascinated gaze of a child at play: and in truth, the picturesque troop, with their bright blue and scarlet dresses, their silver ornaments, and outlandish head-

gear, made almost a theatrical display among the trees. When the last figure had disappeared behind the glowing boles of pine and elm she breathed a happy yet questioning sigh, and looked into her lover's eyes.

"This little idyl has pleased you?" he asked, bending a flushed, joyous face towards her own.

"Oh, yes!" she replied, her eyes filling with tears under the light kiss now dropped upon them. "But, Edouard, before we spread our basket, and eat the first meal we have ever eaten alone together, answer me one question."

He guessed what was coming, and, taking her hand, led her to a little knoll of velvety gold-green moss tapestried with ground ivy. Then he sat down beside her, and said, gravely,

"I know well what you would fain ask me, Hildegard. Your face speaks to me always without any need of words. Why do I thus allow you to play a part? How can I reconcile my conscience to the deception, playful though it be, that I have just compelled you to countenance? Listen, and you shall be fully answered."

Even these few words were already easing Hildegard's burdened mind. She felt, though she could not in the least divine by what reasoning, that her secretly nursed misgivings were about to be set at rest for once and for all.

"The notion of your visit here originated, as you know, with Hilda," he began, very deliberately. "I accepted it on two grounds; chiefly because I felt that it would test—not your affection for me, I felt no doubts there—but your ability to endure the only

kind of existence I am enabled to offer a wife—the simple home life you have since taken to so kindly; and secondly because”—here he bent down and kissed the fair face looking up to him with lover-like fondness—“because a little happiness was thus put in our way of which no living soul had the right to deprive us. Hilda’s subterfuge was to spare an endless discussion with her grandmother; but never doubt that Frau Anna shall not be informed of the fact on her return.”

So far all seemed transparent as daylight to the anxiously listening Hildegarde.

He went on: “I could even more readily excuse myself for having played a harmless trick on my good mother and sisters. They would never have consented to receive as a guest the Princess Hildegarde; but you have come under a more modest title, and they love you already. Of course they, too, are to be enlightened in due time. And now for the future. What Hilda’s jest has done for us is this—to prove the sincerity of our affection for one another. I dare hope, moreover, in spite of so many obstacles.”

She hearkened, brightening under every word, till by the time his speech drew to an end, it was a radiant face that almost touched his own.

“Everything depends on your constancy, your powers of endurance,” he continued; “and, had I not foreseen a possibility of our wishes being fulfilled, I should never have spoken out. You are aware that your mother’s marriage was very displeasing to the Grand Duke, insomuch so that he did his best to annul it. It is on this circumstance we must build our hopes. Who knows but that your great-uncle may

be brought to consent to our union, thankful"—here he smiled, and clasped her hand—"thankful to be rid of such a burden."

Hildegarde also laughed merrily, the gay mood being sobered a moment later.

"Then my love for you will never lead me into doing anything wrong?" she asked, timidly.

"What is wrong?" he repeated, with almost cynical bitterness. "Would you do wrong in marrying the first suitor presented to you by your great-uncle; perhaps a man you could not respect, much less regard with common liking? Would you do wrong in hearkening rather to conscience than human bidding, and choosing for yourself in the most sacred choice a woman has to make? Where is the right, where the wrong here? I must tell you, my Hildegarde, I take small account of those social distinctions which you have been taught to regard with almost religious awe. Are we not men and women first, and paupers and princelings afterwards? No, the time is gone by, never to return, when the fiction called royalty can inspire the reverence due only to higher things; and I, for one, rejoice in the prospect of much more fundamental changes in the same direction. I hold myself bound by no other code of moral responsibility to the Grand Duke than to a peasant, and, were you of age to-morrow, would make you my wife as unconcernedly as if you were the peasant-born Hilda."

Hildegarde, letting fall happy tears, could but flush proudly as she gazed on her self-confident, defiant lover. She put her hand in his and said,

"When that time comes, Edouard, I will be your wife."

He looked into her sweet eyes, brimful of tender girlish passion, pausing to riddle their secret again and again ere he made reply.

"And I will be your husband," he said, "or no woman's. Remember my words."

Then, after that tension of deep feeling, both were glad to return to the every-day world of common pleasures for awhile.

Hildegarde, with childish gaiety, and grace spread the contents of her picnic basket on the turf. Dr. Edouard fetched water from the spring, and alone in that delicious glade, a little world in itself of sunshine and loveliness and joy, they lived a little life of bliss as rounded as complete.

CHAPTER X.

It was late when the lovers returned, and a moon mellow and perfect as their own hopes lighted their homeward way. Arm in arm they traversed the mountain path, or side by side sat in the moonlit stage-coach. Hildegarde said little. She was indeed too happy for speech, her lover's daring words having, as it seemed to her, demolished the outward wall of separation that had hitherto threatened to divide them. This ineffable, mildly illumined world was to the girl's quiet yet intense nature emblematic of the peace and tenderness flooding their hearts. The first early rapture had passed away. All with them was now brooding calm and content.

And when they alighted from the stage-coach and walked through the dreaming suburb, themselves, as it seemed, the only happy spirits disturbing the silvery solitude, the flower-scented stillness, neither had a word to say. Hildegarde's hand rested lightly on her lover's arm. He could see the placid brow and sweet collected smile under the brim of her straw hat. He wanted no more. Only when they had entered the little garden of his home, and they paused for a moment to interchange a fond good night, he reminded her of her promise.

"I have said it. I will be your wife," she whispered.

A moment more they lingered in the enchanted outdoor world of mysterious light and luminous shadow,

of cool, deep-breathing fragrance, and the thousand nameless indications of sleeping summer. It was as if they felt themselves under the spell of some magic, conscious all the time that a step forward would break the charm. So indeed it was and must be at the close of each so foolishly happy day.

Dr. Edouard put his latchkey to the lock, and on tip-toe the pair passed into the silent house. It was almost midnight, and the hard-working little household they knew would be asleep, except perhaps for the ever anxious mother. But as they went into the dining-room, where a tiny lamp gave feeble light, no one appeared.

"Everyone seems to be in bed," Dr. Edouard said, laughingly. "It is a rule of our house that the hard worker shall never sit up for the holiday maker. But whom have we here?"

"Poor Bärbel has fallen asleep whilst waiting for us," Hildegard said carelessly, helping herself to some bread and butter at the supper-table as she spoke. "Do not awake her, Edouard."

Dr. Edouard turned to her with much astonishment.

"It is not our Bärbel, but Hilda's Gretel," he said, looking discomfited. "What may her errand be? And see, the little note has evidently dropped from her hand to the floor."

He picked up the crumpled letter, and, Hildegard going quickly to his side, both read it together:

"Dearest Hildegard," it ran, and had evidently been penned in desperate haste, "the Hofrath came to fetch you yesterday. There was no help for it. I returned with him to the Schloss in your place. As yet I have seen no one else, all may be made

right, but set off at once. If you are not here in twenty-four hours I shall be presented, perhaps be betrothed to Prince Waldemar in your stead."

Hildegarde became speechless with dismay, nor did Dr. Edouard misinterpret the situation. Hilda's words must be taken at their full value. They meant no more nor less than they said. This matchless Hilda had come to the rescue with a vengeance, and was already at the Schloss.

"There is a postscript," he said, and coolly read the following:—

"Come if you will, but stay away if you choose. You are free to give up your birthright and accept mine instead. Exchange is no robbery; why may we not all three be happily fated by a jest?"

"Oh!" were Hildegarde's first words, "should Hilda have done this? To what is she leading us?"

"Nay, we will suffer no one to lead us, but we will be guided by our own judgment," was her lover's proud, collected answer. Then, in spite of the dire entanglement in which he found himself, he could not resist a smile. "Hilda is incredible!"

For some moments he said no more, and the smile still lingered on his lips. The notion of the sparkling, audacious, incomparable Hilda playing the part of princess tickled his sense of humour. It seemed indeed, on further reflection, that her daringness was leading them, as Hildegarde said — and whither?

"But she would not have done this, even for love of me!" cried Hildegarde. "Do you not see how difficult it will be to set matters right?"

"I do see it indeed," Dr. Edouard said, not for a

moment losing presence of mind, although keenly alive to his position. "We must remember, however, that Hilda being completely taken by surprise could hardly have done otherwise. She had Frau Anna to think of."

"Hilda is generosity itself; but, Edouard, how can I do what she says and be made happy by a lie? Oh! what can I do?"

Even with that tearful anguish-stricken face close to his own, Dr. Edouard held his peace now. He seemed bent on probing her constancy.

"It is not the dread of discovery that daunts me," she went on, with the tender insistence of timid, yet rigidly upright natures. "I was too neglected and uncared for to be remembered at the Schloss. But it is the terror of doing wrong!" Then she added, artlessly, "If indeed I stay here as Hilda proposes, and become your wife as Frau Anna's grand-daughter, who should I be? what should I be?"

This naïve, almost childish burst of feeling melted Dr. Edouard's resolve to keep silence till he had her answer. He would no longer leave the timid, tremulous thing alone in the thorny world of conflict.

"What could you be?" he said, folding her to his breast; "one thing I know right well, the honoured wife of an honest man. But never that by virtue of a lie! Never, never!"

For a moment he held her in his arms, and, though not a syllable more was whispered, both understood each other's unspoken thoughts. Hildegard felt this proud, unruffled love to be a tower of strength; he realised the unswerving constancy of the timid being clinging to him.

"And now," he said, when this momentous under-

standing was over, "let us wake up Gretel, and see what light she can throw on the mystery, for mystery it yet remains."

The waking up of Gretel, however, was no easy matter. Again and again she gave sleepy signs of consciousness, and again and again lapsed into impenetrable slumber. The poor creature had indeed arrived five hours before, half dead with fatigue. Even consternation at finding Hildegarde absent could not keep her awake.

When at last she was fairly aroused, her dismay knew no bounds.

"Already midnight! no chance of post-horses till dawn! The Schloss not to be reached under fourteen hours! Her errand miscarried! Oh! what would become of her? what *would* her young lady say?"

"Most probably nothing," retorted the young doctor, drily. Hilda's covert wishes—he would not do her the injustice of calling them intentions—had flashed on him from the first; and underlying an instinctive feeling of resentment was an impulse of sympathetic humour. He could hardly be angry with the girl, although she had, from desiring to better herself, thus drolly placed him in an odious dilemma.

"Whatever happens, no harm shall come to you, my good Gretel," he added; "and now dry your eyes and tell us all that you have to say."

Gretel then, with many sobs and groans, explained matters. Hilda being taken by surprise, had personated the princess in the first instance, and returned with the Hofrath to the Schloss. She further elucidated Hilda's letter by relating how her young mistress, under a plea of fatigue, would keep her bed till sufficient time

should elapse for Hildegarde's arrival. Further, Gretel explained that the court was expected from the summer palace next day, and that—so the Hofrath said—in attendance on the Grand Duke was the Prince Waldemar, to whom Princess Hildegarde was to be immediately betrothed.

"Up hill and down hill I trotted in the heat of the sun," cried poor Gretel, amid sobs and sighs. "Up hill and down hill, for the rail only brought me half way, and now it is too late, too late!"

"Too late to do anything but go on sleeping," replied the young doctor, with imperturbable calmness. "Go back to your arm-chair, my good Gretel, and slumber on, for, if the very safety of your head depended on it, no messenger could reach the palace by noon to-morrow."

Turning to Hildegarde, he added, very carefully,

"You too can do nothing so wise as to follow Gretel's example. You see there is absolutely nothing to be done till the morning. Hilda's fatigue must last, that is all;" and he smiled a little longer.

"If we could but gain time!" said Hildegarde.

"We must gain time," was the confident reply.

And thereupon the masterful young doctor put a bed-room candle into her hand, turned the key upon the still agitated Gretel, and betook himself to his study to ponder on the situation.

CHAPTER XI.

BEAUTIFUL butterfly imprisoned in dusky cocoon, the dreaming Hilda kept her silk-curtained bed. Summer breezes stirred the green venetians of the window and wafted fragrance of freshly-cut flowers from the adjoining room. In the dim light, made by drawn hangings and closed shutters, her eyes could yet discern various objects indicating the new world into which she was transported. Tapestries, as it seemed to her enlarging gaze, of extraordinary richness, antique furniture, as she imagined, of rare artistic value, besides countless elegant trifles that appealed warmly to her fastidious taste. There were gold-stoppered perfume bottles on the dressing-table, silver candelabra on the mantelpiece, and by her side, on an exquisite table of inlaid marble, a tray in chased silver, bearing a cup and saucer of finest Dresden ware.

The sight of so many works of art filled Hilda with longing rapture, still more so the glimpse of certain almost bridal-like garments laid out in the tiring-chamber. The beauty and costliness of these delicate summer garments and assorted adjuncts, the lace ruffles, the gloves, the little embroidered slippers, were all exaggerated in her admiring eyes, yet nevertheless need have shamed no royal maiden, much less the Cinderella of one of the poorest and most insignificant ducal families in all Germany. It was evidently intended that the return of the hitherto neglected Hilde-

garde should be *fêted*—at least that she should be treated as a daughter of the house.

Whilst Hilda's fascinated gaze wandered from one of these fairy objects to another, she could not resist from time to time watching the airy little clock on the mantelpiece with feverish impatience. The clock was evidently the work of a French artist; what other knows how to play with the march of time and render it graceful to us? Hilda, however, hardly marked its consummate workmanship, so absorbed was she in one thought—"Would Hildegarde return at noon? Would Hildegarde let her stay?" She had accurately studied the time-tables of railway and stage-coach, and she knew that, if Hildegarde set out immediately after Gretel's arrival, she must catch the train reaching the capital by mid-day.

If, however, by reason of some unavoidable delay, Hildegarde should be too late for the stage-coach setting out at night-fall, she would yet, by taking post-horses, have ample time to meet this train.

Lastly, Hilda reasoned, supposing, on account of some hindrance or other, she missed the mid-day train, and could only reach the Schloss by that arriving at night, she would, of course, telegraph without delay.

Hildegarde's non-arrival, therefore, by twelve of the clock and absolute silence could only be interpreted one way—she would have decided to let Hilda stay in her place!

"After all," soliloquized this nineteen-year old philosopher, "why might not this be? I am surely fitted to fill the position Hildegarde regards with abhorrence. She would make an admirable country physician's wife. None would be the wiser! No pos-

sible harm could accrue to any living soul by such an exchange, and of course it should be disclosed to the only person whom it can concern, namely, this Prince Waldemar. Very probably he would have in me a wife much more to his taste than his shy little cousin! As for myself," reasoned the young lady, coolly, yet not in the least degree flippantly, "I have no romantic schoolgirl's notions about love. My conviction is that love has little to do with happiness in married life, and that happy marriages will only be the rule when men and women choose each other for intellectual fitness instead of sentimental fancy!"

Hilda could not resist seeing the humorous side of her position, and more than once a ripple of gently suppressed laughter might be heard from under that soft canopy. "A princess one moment, perhaps to be degraded into a waiting-woman the next! A Serene Highness to-day, a village maiden to-morrow! What a sport of fortune was she!" The thought that really dismayed her was the possibility of a mischievous vacillation on Hildegarde's part. Suppose some inherited, though hitherto dormant, pride of birth should assert itself at the last moment, and she should come forth to claim her birthright too late—too late to avoid an unexampled, an ineffaceable, a hateful scandal! For the most part, however, the waking dreams of this would-be princess were roseate as the silken hangings of her bed. The strong loyal attachment of the lovers would surely prevail, and she would be left to the enjoyment of her princessdom in peace! Thus she mused as the quiet hours of the golden morn wore on till a sound from the Dome Tower caused her to start up trembling with excitement. It was indeed twelve of the clock!

Hilda paused for a moment, flushed rosy red, then, shaking down her long fair hair, she leaned forward, and daintily put one lovely, blue-veined little foot on the crimson floss rug. With one white foot thus planted on the floor she paused for a moment as if in hesitation—but for a moment only.

The next her little silver handbell tinkled for the tire-woman—the dreaming figure of the coral pink draperies was the Princess Hildegarde indeed!

CHAPTER XII.

IF the events of the past twenty-four hours had seemed like a vision to the bewildered yet ever circumspect Hilda, how much more dreamlike were those of the next! Yet everything was as real as could be—the stiff family dinner, the oftentimes incoherent garrulousness of the blind old Duke, the would-be affability of the Duchess, the honest, soldier-like utterances of Prince Waldemar.

And now, next morning, exquisitely dressed in unadorned girlish white, and perfectly composed, she was awaiting an interview with her kind old friend the Hofrath. The various parts, indeed, she was called to play delighted the imitative Hilda beyond measure. Last night—how could she help knowing it?—she had created a very favourable impression by acting the part of a half-timid yet clever *ingénue*, but in private interviews with the Hofrath she could venture on being her own fearless, sprightly self.

“Ah,” cried the Hofrath, rubbing his hands pleasantly as he found her in her pretty boudoir, looking quite at home; “ah! you never occupied these rooms before, but you become them well; and now, my dear young lady, I have something to say to you.”

He glanced round, closed the outer door, and, sitting down by her side with the ease of an old and privileged servant of the house, began,

“You know the fatherly interest, as I may venture

to call it, that I have ever taken in all the princes of the ducal family from their childhood upwards, and the confidence that has been put in me for thirty years and more by my august master and mistress. You will not, therefore, blame me if I broach very delicate topics to you."

What need Hilda do but smile in her sweetest manner?

The old man went on:

"It is, then, of Prince Waldemar I have to speak. You are destined, as you know, for each other; and indeed, it was for the express purpose of hurrying on the betrothal and—I may say—marriage, that you were so suddenly summoned from your country retreat. Unexpected things have happened to make this desirable. In fact,"—here he dropped his voice almost to a whisper—"in fact, the Duchess's only son, the Grand Duke's grandson, you know——"

"My cousin Moritz," said Hilda, with all the aplomb in the world.

"Exactly? The delicate little lad, born when you were learning your catechism. Well, he has always been in poor health, and is now in the Mediterranean on account of a delicate chest. The physicians declare him to be hopelessly consumptive. You perhaps can see the bearing of these facts?"

"Perfectly," was Hilda's ready reply. She had studied the pedigree of her adopted family. "If the duchess should have the misfortune to lose him, Prince Waldemar becomes heir to the duchy."

"Admirable discrimination!" rejoined the Hofrath. "That is, indeed, the situation, and you will easily see the desirability of settling the prince's domestic

affairs; in fact, finding him a princess fitted to share the exalted position to which he will in all probability, and ere long, be called; and, although into these particulars I need not now go, there were especial reasons why the princess chosen for him should be one of his own family—interests of state, interests of property, interests of dynasty, all pointed this way. But pray give me credit for my perspicacity, princess! In the dilemma, I was the first person who thought of *you!*”

“I shall ever owe you a debt of gratitude; though what part I can shall be paid,” Hilda replied, with engaging insinuation.

“Generosity itself! I knew that in the little Princess Hildegarde of former days I should find a friend and an advocate beside my future sovereign! Ah! this is a selfish world, and there are already, I know right well, clamourers for the place I have filled honestly for the best part of my life. But,” he said, wiping away a tear and bending low over her outstretched hand, “it would be indiscreet in me to prolong this interview any longer, and I see the Grand Duke is already on the terrace taking his airing, with the prince by his side. They wished me to conduct you to them. There is, however, one more word I have to say.”

Here he looked round cautiously, assured himself that there was no one in the ante-room, and added,

“The duchess is particularly anxious that no reflection should be made on your long absence, necessitated, as was thought, by your delicate health, and also by unfortunate family complications. You are doubtless aware that the marriage of your august

mother, the Princess Hilda, was contracted without the due consent and formal ratification of the Grand Duke. It was indeed a *mésalliance*, which, but for other circumstances in your favour, might have cost you your position as a daughter of this house; and which, of itself, was sufficient to account for the temporary seclusion imposed on you. But no more; I see that I am understood."

Hilda bowed acquiescingly, and the pair descended to the garden, a maid following with her work-basket and a light shawl.

"You may like to spend an hour afterwards in the summer-house," said the Hofrath, "but for the present the terrace is shaded from the sun."

During the first quarter of an hour the trio paced beside the duke's sedan chair, hardly more animated than the bent, decrepit figure within. At last the duke nodded, fairly in a drowse, and the Hofrath, looking at his companions significantly, entered into conversation with the attendant; the prince and Hilda fell back with lips unsealed.

She knew well enough what the fine soldierly man had to say, or, at least, of one thought uppermost in his mind. Brief although her acquaintance had been, it needed no perception acute as her own to note the electric effect of her presence on one more accustomed to camps and battle-fields than to drawing-rooms and ladies' battle-fields. This young, yet already weather-beaten hero, with the frank blue eyes and boyish blush, was indeed at first sight, and quite naturally, in love. Less had Hilda's outward grace taken him captive than her sparkling humour, her fine yet ingenuous tact, her candid but engaging speech.

To him the tall slender girl, with her commanding presence and royal looks, was fit to be a queen; but it was her wit and her sprightliness that enslaved, not her happy gift of beauty; and he felt almost humbled by his sense of inferiority to her, the very first words spoken to her intimately giving the key-note to his thoughts.

"I am a soldier," he began.

"And one who has adorned his profession!" replied Hilda, her bright eye fascinated to the stars on his breast.

Again a manly blush overspread the prince's face, and he answered, with modest dignity—

"Ah! my cousin, could you see with your mind's eye the horrors amid which these baubles were earned, and could you realise the kind of heroism they have rewarded, you would turn from them and from me with repugnance."

"You are, then, well pleased to give up a soldier's career?"

Hilda's sympathetic attitude was not feigned. Truth to tell, nothing could have more touched her in an adorer than shyness and subservience of this manly kind. His simple kindness of manner, moreover, won her heart. He seemed so longing for some one's kindness, for some one on whom to lavish his own.

"What should I be indeed, if I were otherwise than well content?" he said; adding with a smile, "though I did not feel at all sure but that worse things might be in store for me."

Hilda laughed merrily.

"I am such a monster, then?" she asked.

"How could I tell?"

He glanced round, dropped his voice a note lower, and went on, with the utmost frankness—

"You know, of course, my position here; how entirely I am beholden to my great-uncle for everything. We are both waifs and strays"—he looked at her with yearning friendliness as he said this—"I was bound to accept, without a murmur, the bride of the Grand Duke's choosing, just as you were bound to accept the bridegroom. We two had not a word to say in the matter. Did you not also dread this meeting?"

A blush came to Hilda's relief. She made that do duty for a reply.

"I confess to you," he continued, "that I never looked forward to an encounter with the enemy more dismally. I had no means of knowing what you were like. I was obliged to pay court to you, to marry you—even although we should detest each other! What an awful position! worse perhaps for the man than the woman."

He again perused her with wistful, admiring fondness, and added,

"And then, after all my doubts and misgivings, to find *you!*"

Few and simple although these words, they told her with searching eloquence the power she had already gained over him. No praise of her beauty, no appreciation of her wit, could have borne profounder meaning. Whilst Hilda fully comprehended this, and was longing to show kindness to her unconfident lover, she felt conscious for the first time in her life of being at a disadvantage. These shy, hesitating ex-

pressions of feeling unnerved, even abashed her, and she dreaded lest more should come.

One other short lover-like speech he did indeed make, but only with a great effort.

"Do you feel no misgivings now?" he asked.

Hilda fancied that a tear glistened in his eye as he spoke, and certainly his voice trembled.

"I will answer that question another time. Let us talk of yourself. Tell me of your former life," she made reply. "I should like to hear of all that you have done, and of the different countries you have seen."

"Shall we take this path?" he asked; "it winds down to a little basin of water in which I used to swim my boats as a child. Do you not remember it?"

Such natural yet disturbing questions were the only drawbacks to Hilda's tranquil enjoyment. She was no coquette, but the naïve adoration of this brave young soldier fascinated her, and when thus suddenly recalled to a sense of her perilous position she could but feel aghast. "Was she indeed playing a reckless game with her honest lover? Was she in a dream that might be snapped the next moment?" She dared not face such possibilities.

"No, I do not remember it," she said, simply.

"Ah, I forget that you were not much here in those early days. We should have been playmates. It was cruel to send you away."

They strolled down the smooth gravel walk leading to an artificial glen, in the midst of which shone the crystal waters of a mimic lake. The spot was charming, and, still having the terrace and sedan chair in sight, they sat down and chatted in easy friendly fashion.

"Have you heard what has happened, or, rather, what may happen?" he asked, growing more and more confidential to this sweet new friend.

Hilda glanced at the distant figure of the Hofrath significantly.

"Yes," he went on, "of course the Hofrath would tell you why you and I have on a sudden become grand personages! This poor boy's illness has checkmated my aunt, the duchess, who had no great liking either for you or me! But she cannot help herself, and, although I heartily hope the lad may live and recover his health, I will not be a hypocrite, and say I despise good fortune;" he added, "having you to share it with me."

Then, emboldened by the sense of new happiness, he continued in freer, more confident strains,

"Had I never been a soldier, never known the horrors of war, I should have desired nothing so much as a retired country life. But, Hildegarde, if I am ever master here, if I am able to hinder so much as one unrighteous, inglorious war—are not all wars indeed so?—I would hold no sacrifice of quiet and repose too great. The horrors, the cruelties I have seen, and even taken part in! The unmanliness that a thirst for military glory puts into us! These baubles you admired just now," and as he spoke he pointed to the decorations on his breast, "were it possible, I would trample them under-foot, for are not one and all such symbols red with human blood?"

For a moment he allowed one hand to rest on hers, and added, with deep feeling,

"No, Hildegarde; such are not the things that cheer the soldier in the midst of carnage, that help

him to do his ghastly work, and fill him with joy if he survives a victory! It is the thought of sweetheart, wife, children, that makes men heroes. For are we not men before we become patriots, human beings before we are French, Germans, English? And in the midst of the battle-field, in the horrid *mêlée*, when I have dealt some gallant fellow his death-blow—Heaven forgive me!—I have cursed my calling, and almost my sovereign, for the misery thus brought by my unwilling hands on some fond woman at home. But let us not speak of it! Let us be happy and dream of peace together!”

Just then, whilst that fine glow lingered on the soldier's face, and Hilda's was raised admiringly, they heard the sound of footsteps on the gravel path. Looking up, they perceived the Hofrath coming towards them with a card in his hand.

“I much regret being under the necessity of disturbing you,” he said, bowing to both; “but the bearer of this card insists on demanding an interview. He says Prince Waldemar will remember his name well.”

The Prince rose, and read aloud—

DR. EDOUARD JÄGER, JUNIOR.

“Remember him!” cried Prince Waldemar, bending to the consternated Hilda; “I should say so, indeed! He saved my life, and that of many of my brave fellows, when acting as ambulance surgeon five years ago! Excuse me, my cousin.”

And with that he followed the Hofrath indoors. Hilda, concealing her agitation, betook herself to her room.

CHAPTER XIII.

No dilemma could possibly have been more ungrateful to a proud, fastidious man like Dr. Edouard, than that in which he had found himself the night before. The open winning of Hildegarde's affections, the covert enjoyment of her society for so many weeks, the deception practised on Frau Anna, had been matters that troubled his conscience little. Hildegarde was, in the spirit if not in the letter, an outcast of the ducal house, and free to choose for herself, whilst an after explanation with Frau Anna and his family would easily excuse her visit and the disguise in which it was made. Hitherto nothing had occurred outside the range of his own responsibility. On himself must fall the blame of Hildegarde's conduct from the first, however much Hilda had ministered to their wishes. But now he saw himself caught within a fatal circle, entangled and enmeshed by a chain of circumstances over which he had no control, and for which he must be held accountable. He could not severely blame the unscrupulous yet warm-hearted girl who was the cause of this imbroglio. If Hilda was bent, as he believed, on playing out the daring game to the last, at least it was as much in his interests and Hildegarde's as her own. Hilda could not more impatiently rebel against the humble *rôle* of dame Anna's grandchild, than Hildegarde against the more ambitious position to which she was recalled. Exchange here

must be an immeasurable boon to both. On himself, his honest manly love for the sweet girl who adored him, his own future as it was bound up with hers, the young doctor would not now dwell. He was called upon to act without taking account of a single interested motive. The only way to disentangle matters was to be hard upon Hilda, hard upon Hildegarde, and hardest of all upon himself. Only by an immediate disclosure could Frau Anna and Gretel be freed from blame.

He must in the early morning set off for the Schloss, and there lay the whole affair before the Prince Waldemar of whom Hilda wrote. The business staring him in the face was altogether odious, but it was inevitable.

For the first time in his life, the haughty, self-contained young doctor saw himself confronted by dishonour. Throughout a short but not uneventful career, he had kept clear of any deed that could bring a blush to his face; his conduct had been fearless, not seldom high-handed, but ever irreproachable, and perhaps none of his contemporaries had gained so high a reputation, first as a man, and secondly as a man of science.

It could but wound him in the most sensitive part to contemplate the issues of to-morrow's revelation. He saw himself by anticipation found guilty of a breach of trust the most delicate that could have been entrusted to him; held up to scorn as the accomplice of a reckless girl, and the abettor, if not instigator, of an unpardonable trick. And his good mother and adoring sisters, what would they say? He could bear the wrath of his exalted patrons, but how should he

encounter their looks of silent reproach? But no more of this! "The thing must be done," he said, "and the less of useless thinking the better." So he sat down and pencilled the following note to Hildegarde:—

"I go at once to the Residency, but say nothing of what has happened as yet; meantime keep Gretel in your sight. You shall hear from me as soon as may be."

He then put together a few necessaries for his journey, and lay down to snatch what sleep he could. By cock-crowing he was once more on the alert. To refresh himself with a douche of cold water, to boil some coffee, was the work of a few minutes only. By five o'clock he was at the post-house, and a quarter of an hour later, perched on the top of the cumbersome old diligence, was toiling through the sweet pastoral landscape towards the Residency.

Serene aspects of Nature can but soothe, especially when seen in the virginal freshness of early morning, and animated by the pathetic side of human life: the life that is bound up with the seasons, and draws its very sustenance from the fruits of the soil.

Dr. Edouard had set forth in a state of feeling that bordered on desperation, but in observing the crops and chatting with his neighbours on rustic matters, he gradually recovered his usual tempered collectedness. And another train of thought had opened up much more cheerful vistas. This Prince Waldemar: who was he? Could he be the Prince Waldemar he knew; and, if so, of what other man in the world had he equal right to demand a favour?

CHAPTER XIV.

"OH, it is cruel!" thought Hilda, as she shut herself up in that exquisite little room peopled with joyous fantasies an hour before.

"Why did he not come at once, or stay away altogether?" she said, dropping into a low chair, ready to weep with dismay and mortification. Dr. Edouard's errand could mean only one thing, a merciless exposure, an unbearable *esclandre*, in which she must figure as prime mover. Her first, and perhaps natural, impulse was of ungenerous reproach, even mistrust. The haughty, over-bearing young physician was well pleased to crush her high spirit. Sportively for the most part, yet at times in bitter earnest, they had often been at warfare; and it was he who was ever worsted. The opportunity had come. He could enjoy his revenge!

But hardly were the scalding tears dashed away from her burning cheeks, when a truer and better feeling took possession of her. Dr. Edouard might have disliked, even detested, her in former days, but he had long since been her servitor and adherent. How much happiness did he not owe her? How much brother-like confidence had he not given? No, if indeed, as she must believe, Dr. Edouard was come to lay the matter before Prince Waldemar, at least he would inculcate himself as well as others. He was hard-headed, but he possessed a rigid sense of justice.

No woman should be made the scapegoat of his own indiscretions.

These more temperate reflections, however, far from mollified her towards her former adversary. He ought to have come at once, or, if that were absolutely impossible, he should have sent a telegram. A word from him twenty-four hours ago would have prevented this misadventure. She could then have taken all necessary precautions. She could (here the incomparable Hilda smiled to herself in spite of her dire discomfiture), she could have feigned toothache and bandaged her face. She could have feigned headache and kept her darkened room a day longer. There were dozens of ways by which the fictitious Hildegarde could have been kept in the background and properly disguised, till the real one should assume her proper place.

But now there was no way of escape. That close feminine scrutiny of the duchess, that long family dinner, that morning's confabulation with the prince, had identified her but too well. Form, features, voice, all must now be indelibly imprinted on the minds of at least these two. There existed certainly a remarkable likeness between herself and her *sœur de lait*, but,—and here again Hilda smiled, and leaning back contemplated her image in the mirror opposite—but how superficial must it appear to those who really knew them both! No; an odious, an outrageous dilemma was at hand, and on her head would the most disagreeable consequences fall.

Yet, as she thought this, thought of the blame and indignity to be heaped on her, thought of the brilliant prize about to elude her grasp for ever, a purer and

better regret filled her mind. The daring, reckless girl now for the first time in her life compassionated herself, or at least that tender, kinder part of herself only revealed to-day.

Where were her ambitions, her airy hopes, her far-reaching designs now? As she thought of her frank, manly lover, she only felt conscious of wanting to share his lot, and not because it was princely, but because she loved him. Her pranksome jest had landed her on unexpected shoals and quicksands, from which rescue seemed hopeless. In feeling thus pity for herself, she could but feel deeper pity for him. Those simple, honest utterances of a man's first love had touched her more than any expression of passion or sentiment could do. He wanted only her affection and kindness, and she had thus deceived him!

But Hilda possessed a spirit not to be crushed even by such misadventures as these. She would not redden her eyes with weeping. She would control herself, and proudly await the issue of events. What blame was justly hers, she felt able to bear.

The recognition of the inevitable in human affairs often brings composure when all else fails; and, if Hilda had been on the verge of breaking down, this thought would have stood her in good stead. "After all, I came to the Schloss because I could not do otherwise. Having gone so far, it was impossible to draw back." And, she reasoned, "the jest itself, as it emanated from my brain, was at least harmless enough, and I am not alone responsible for its after consequences. Dr. Edouard and Hildegarde will take their share of blame. My grandmother and Gretel must be cleared at any cost." What she really shrank

from was the thought of Waldemar's sorrow. Would he refuse ever to see her again? Would he forgive her? Would he cling to her? Yet what foolish dreaming was this! Of what good for the heir-presumptive of a proud duchy to cling to Hilda, the village maiden!

The moments dragged along heavily, and she could hardly wish them to go faster. She tried to occupy her mind with a book, with music, with embroidery: all failed. Pale from expectation and suspense, she again sat down by the window, incapable of doing anything. An hour or more passed thus. At last she heard voices outside—those of the Hofrath and Dr. Edouard. She started up, and by a great effort forced herself into an appearance of smiling calm.

In another moment a servant had announced them.

CHAPTER XV.

THE Hofrath was the first to speak.

"I bring the Princess Hildegarde a visitor who requires no introduction," he said. "Dr. Edouard would not, naturally, quit the palace without paying respects to his former patient."

That little speech set Hilda's mind at rest, at least on one point. There was to be no disclosure now. For the present she could wear the mask. She glanced at Dr. Edouard, but nothing whatever was to be gathered from that unreadable physiognomy. Cool, stolid, and ceremonious, the young physician greeted her with the utmost formality. Hilda returned his salutations with equal aplomb. Then the trio sat down, and there ensued a little comedy, in which it would be hard to say whose part was best played, Dr. Edouard's or that of the pseudo-princess.

"My good friend the Hofrath" (here he smiled and glanced at their companion) "understands the nature of my errand, though into details it would be impolitic to enter even to him. We never mention names at court, do we, Hofrath? I have come to ask a favour at the hand of the prince. I hope I shall have the princess's suffrages?"

Hilda bowed and smiled.

"I knew," the young doctor went on, with matchless coolness, "at least I dared assure myself, of your good offices. You have always showed quite inappro-

priate gratitude for such small services as I have been able to render. I felt sure that the Princess Hildegarde would be my advocate."

"The princess is the advocate of all who have had the privilege of serving her," put in the Hofrath, officiously. "Ah, Dr. Edouard! it is an unspoiled woman's heart that we have here. No cold imitation, no semblance."

Dr. Edouard smiled with assenting politeness, and went on in the same tone.

"I am bound to explain to the princess that, in giving me her favours, she runs no risk of discommending herself with others or setting aside those having greater claims. It is not for place or promotion I have come to ask."

"That is an unnecessary disclaimer on the part of Dr. Edouard," again put in the Hofrath, laying a friendly hand on the young man's shoulder. "Ah, princess! you know not what a Timon, what a democrat, is your mild physician!"

"The Hofrath may call me worse names if he pleases," Dr. Edouard answered, with a smile and a shrug of the shoulders. "I confess it; I am no courtier, no aristocrat, and, though I have the warmest regard for Prince Waldemar, I have studiously avoided him for years, simply because he happened to be born a prince."

"Think of that!" cried the Hofrath, raising his hands with a gesture of astonishment. "The very reason that sends the rest of us to our knees makes Dr. Edouard sulk and run away. He might have worn a decoration long ago. He might have had a Von to put before his name. He might have been named

court physician! For, do you know of this young man's exploits?"

Dr. Edouard checked the Hofrath's effusion with politely reined-in impatience.

"The truth is simply this," he said, "and I must not allow my good friend the Hofrath to exaggerate my merits as an ambulance doctor in the last war. I was accidentally enabled to render the prince some service."

"He saved the life of the present heir-presumptive to the duchy! Ay—that of many a gallant fellow besides; he performed marvels of courage and skill."

"I am not astonished to learn anything of Dr. Edouard," Hilda said, raising her eyes to the doctor with really wonderful self-command. He, however, perceived the touch of satire so finely veiled, and could not resist a retaliation.

"Of all persons in the world, the Princess Hildgarde" (here he bowed to Hilda), "has ever shown the greatest readiness to appreciate me beyond my deserts," he said, "for which, indeed, I shall ever be truly grateful." And again the pair bowed, the Hofrath looking on admiringly, without the faintest suspicion of the double comedy thus being acted under his eyes. "But," resumed Dr. Edouard, "I really cannot stay to hear the Hofrath impose such fables on the princess, and having assured myself of her good offices, and" (here he looked at her with professional deliberateness) "also that she is in enjoyment of perfect health, I will take my leave."

"Ah," exclaimed the Hofrath, also perusing Hilda, but with self-evident admiration; "ah, doctor, who could have foretold that the fragile plant would have

grown into the splendid flower we see! Your mountain air has metamorphosed the princess into a wholly different person."

"It has indeed," Hilda replied. "Might not one suppose, Herr Hofrath, that it was no Hildegarde, but some robust peasant maiden come here in her place?" And she thereupon laughed merrily.

"No, I will not go so far," answered the smooth-tongued old courtier. "If the mountain air has put roses in your cheeks, it has not taken away your high-bred look and speech. The Princess Hildegarde is changed, but remains herself nevertheless."

"True, true," said Dr. Edouard, with well-feigned impatience. He was indeed anxious to end this scene, his sense of humour threatening at last to get the upper hand. What exquisite enjoyment to throw off the mask, to declare the truth, to see the effect of it in the bewildered Hofrath! The temptation within him was almost irresistible. He rose to go. Nothing, however, of all this was to be read in his impassive features, and only one look of understanding did he venture to give Hilda at parting. That look she interpreted to the letter. It inspired no hope; still less did it awaken apprehension. It only inculcated caution.

At the last moment, however, just as Dr. Edouard was about to go, the Hofrath's ever alert attention happened to be diverted by carriage wheels just under the balcony. In a moment, he had sprung to the bay window, and was peering out to see who the visitors might be. Hilda seized the chance thus thrown in her way to put the question she had been longing to ask throughout the interview.

"Will the prince grant your request?"

That was all she dared to say, and his reply was no less brief and unsuggestive to possible eavesdroppers.

"He will reflect."

Then the Hofrath emerged from the balcony, and etiquette forbade a longer interview. Hilda found herself alone. On the whole, she could but congratulate herself on the turn affairs had taken. Her lover was about to reflect on the matter! How, indeed, could he do otherwise?

She could not any more resist a smile as she thought of the dilemma in which Prince Waldemar had suddenly found himself. Yet it did not seem to her unconventional audacious mind that it was a dilemma to rebel against. Chance, or rather a happy jest, had thrown him in the way of the very woman he confessed was his ideal; nothing was needed but tact, courage, and self-reliance to secure her for ever. If he should prove weak, vacillating, or a stickler by pride of birth and family tradition, then he were unlike the Waldemar she imagined she knew, and a lover little to her taste.

Hilda was as unromantic as it was possible for a maiden of nineteen to be. But she really liked this simple, dignified soldier; his frank homage pleased, even touched her. She could not believe, as she contemplated the future—and the looking-glass—that he would shrink from the nominal sacrifice which love demanded now at his hands.

With the moral aspect of the question, Hilda troubled herself mightily little. If she chose to change places with the princess, and the princess accepts her

lot, where was the wrong, whose the blame? Both were orphans, both were brotherless, sisterless. The question, therefore, resolved itself into purely a personal one. Provided Prince Waldemar and Dr. Edouard were willing to enter into such a compact, there was absolutely no other living soul in the wide world to whom it was matter of concern. The transfer might be extraordinary, indeed unique. What of that? Were out-of-the-way occurrences and freakish handlings of life more common, existence would be much more bearable, reasoned Hilda. People are such dire cowards, they are staggered at the bare notion of quitting the common groove. Dr. Edouard and Hildegarde, Waldemar and I, hazard a precedent of precedents; "and after all," she repeated, smiling to herself, "exchange is no robbery. We shall be only fated by a jest."

CHAPTER XVI.

SEVERAL days passed without the possibility of a confidence, even had Waldemar desired it; but he seemed to shun any chance of a *tête-à-tête*, Hilda's perspicacity indicating the motive.

It was not mistrust, much less suspicion, that made him dread an interview. Dr. Edouard's manly outspokenness had cleared her of all but the due share of blame. Waldemar was shrinking from no worldly-minded intrigante, no unscrupulous schemer, rather, at least so she fancied, from a romantic, generous girl, whose zealous interference with the due course of things did more credit to the heart than the understanding. Many things besides she read in her lover's candid face as in a printed book—one above all. He was trying to hold aloof from the fascination with which she inspired him; making a tremendous effort to reason himself out of his passion.

Was he resolved that she should not be his wife? Hilda could not tell, and preferred not to guess.

Meantime the hours and days sped by, every bagatelle making the disentanglement more difficult: involving them more implicitly in the fateful web. Another week or two, and, if they sat there with folded hands, their fates would be sealed.

And all this time Hilda knew well enough that she was shining before him in reflected light, the hap-

piest condition in which a wit or a beauty can find herself.

Her sparkling repartee, her skill as a musician, her linguistic powers, were now for the first time in her life turned to delightful account; whilst the natural gaiety of youth alone was a virtue of the first water in this somewhat dreary court.

At last, to Hilda's satisfaction, they found themselves alone. She often spent a cool morning hour by the lakelet on which he had sailed his boat as a boy, and here one day the Hofrath opportunely left the lovers together. In that fragrant bowery retreat they were not likely to be disturbed, and Waldemar breathed a sigh of relief as he sat down beside her. Then he said, the simple, unsophistical words going straight to her heart,

"What must we do?"

She was silent for a moment, all her womanly pride and generosity roused by such a confession of helpless confidence and appeal. Then she said, looking at him straight and unmoved,

"There is one thing I ought to do, and that is to go to the duchess at once and tell her all."

"No," he said, unable to resist a smile in spite of his dire perplexity and uneasiness, "that you shall never do. You do not know my aunt. She would be ready to kill you."

Hilda laughed a scornful little laugh, and a haughty blush dyed her cheeks.

"I fear no one," she said, "the duchess least of all. The only person I should fear is Waldemar," and she smiled at him, "because I have done you bitter wrong."

He looked at her sadly, adoringly, and most of all wonderingly.

"You have wronged me, but I am sure without intention," he said. He was a man little cunning in speech, and, when his heart was fullest, his tongue most halted.

"I will tell you everything," Hilda said, "for you do not yet know what I am, nor does Dr. Edouard either. He could not justify me in your eyes. It was more than a desire to serve Hildegarde that made me come here wearing her disguises. I hoped for some such complication as this. I desired nothing so much as to take her place for once and for all."

He had not a word to say. This dazzling, beautiful girl was bewildering him more than ever. Having little experience of human character, except that gained in camps and barracks, he was more unprepared than most for such a rarity.

"I confess it," Hilda went on, in the same crisp, unswerving tones. "It was a freak to begin with, this notion of changing places, but very serious at last. When I had engaged Hildegarde to go on a visit to Dr. Edouard's family, I had no idea of anything more than making her happy; but somehow when she was away, when I got used to regarding myself, not as the peasant-born Hilda, but the Princess Hildegarde, the delusion pleased me well. I had ever craved a fine fortune from my cradle. I always imagined myself born for better things than the life of a rustic housewife. And my grandmother, forsooth" — here she looked queenly in her scorn — "my grandmother wanted me to marry Dr. Edouard!"

Waldemar would fain have caught her hand and

pressed it to his lips. Her contempt was sweetest flattery to him.

"Dr. Edouard is a worthy fellow, nevertheless," he said, gazing at the defiant, beautiful creature before him in rapture.

"I had no taste for the life of a village doctor's wife," she said; "I wanted to live in the world, to have a career of my own, to become acquainted with the splendour, with the action, with the great movements of society. All my life long I had envied the timid little Hildegarde, only craving a quiet nest, and when—quite on a sudden—the Hofrath came, and I was mistaken for her, I accepted the chance as providential, I thought that my lot was sealed." A lovely blush overspread her features as she added, in a voice that had even a touch of meekness in it, "You will say that I was ignoble, devoid of conscience in conceiving such a thing for a moment; and indeed I wonder now at my hardness. The Hofrath hinted to me of these betrothals, of the suitor awaiting me. Yet I never hesitated. I think frolicsome, high-spirited girls are all like me in this. I have no sentimentality. My head was never full of romance and love-stories. I imagined that I had as good a chance of happiness in thus being chosen for as if I were at liberty to choose for myself, and" (here she held out her hand with a look beseeching immediate forgiveness) "I eased my conscience as far as the unseen suitor was concerned, by reflecting that, as he and Hildegarde were equally strangers to each other, his chances of happiness were precisely the same."

He bent low over the matchless hand, and kissed it a dozen times.

"Oh, Hilda!" he cried, "why may we not be happy together! Why this cruel, hateful heirdom."

She withdrew her hand, and looked at him with that frank, avowed affectionateness he might well accept instead of sentimentality.

"At least," she said, and her eyes brightened, he thought, with tears, "at least you will believe, I know, that my real grief in being sent away will be the conviction of having caused you pain. If I regret" (here an honest glow did no shame to her cheek), "if I regret for a passing moment what else I lose in going back, forgive me, above all, forgive me for having won your affection."

"And you?" he cried, overcome by the sight of her unaffected concern—emotion it could hardly be called; "and you, Hilda? I thought, I hoped, that the affection was not all on my side. Say that you have not deceived me there."

Even in this emergency Hilda, though blushing, tearful, and distressed, must be her own sparkling, audacious self.

"Nay," she said, with the most bewitching look of reproach imaginable; "nay, if you know it not already, no words of mine will bring conviction. Here I am dumb!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A SENSE of comradeship, born of the indescribable sympathy of youth, consoled them, and seemed to bring them very near together. To whom could they pour out each other's hearts but to each other?

"Hilda!" he said, his brief, shy utterance vibrating with deep feeling, "it is this that makes me draw back. Were we indifferent to each other, we might play out this hazardous game to the last; but it must not be."

She hearkened in cold, painful silence. What else, indeed, should she expect to hear?

"I blame no one; least of all you," he said. "You were all free to act as you have done, and brave the consequences; but I possess no such freedom. I am a mere link in the family chain; as much an integral part of race and tradition as each brick is a part of yonder palace. And before I am a prince I am a soldier, trained in the iron school of duty, taught, before all things, to bend the knee to authority. I should not be a man had I not rebelled against this double subjection over and over again, had I not been tempted to curse this bondage of race and calling. I have longed to shake off my fetters, but of course in vain. And now it is too late to mend the teachings of a lifetime; what they have made me I must remain. I blame Dr. Edouard? Not at all. He is a thousand times right, I say, in throwing to the winds all considerations

of rank and prestige, and asserting individual right in the person of my cousin Hildegarde. I am compelled by force of circumstances to act the part of coward and underling. I cannot break the fetters that bind me fast." He looked round to assure himself that no one was within earshot, and added, with gathering storm in his voice—"From the moment I become, in the eyes of my kinsfolk and the world, heir of this house, I lose every vestige of personal independence and freedom. Do not blame me. It is not love that is lukewarm within me, but I cannot, I dare not, purchase our happiness at the price of a subterfuge. Do you not see on what a brink we stand? Think of the perpetual terror of discovery, and the results of discovery! Shame and dishonour overwhelming us, our relationship as husband and wife imperilled, our marriage perhaps annulled! Have you thought of these things?"

No, indeed, she had thought of none of these things. The future, as she had depicted it by his side, had been all secure and fair.

He went on:—

"I have been trying to make up my mind that I was to be as fortunate as others, that we might let things take their smooth course. I put Dr. Edouard's arguments before me, than whom no man's bear more weight. Yet when he avers that my notions concerning lineage and family position are sheer chimeras, and that the fact of birth brings no special duties, I cannot feel convinced. Ah, Hilda! would that I were the obscure soldier of a few weeks back. How gladly I should learn that this heirship I hailed so willingly then were no longer mine, and who can say that this

is impossible? The sickly child yet lives and may recover his health. I may wake up one morning to recover my freedom."

He once more caught her hand, lover-like, to his lips, adding, eagerly—

"If so, I should be free, like Dr. Edouard, to marry whom I pleased. And a proud day for me, when honestly, and before all the world, I might choose for my bride the peasant-born Hilda."

They saw the Hofrath descending the terrace, and he had only time to add—

"But we must gain time. We must do nothing underhand. Time—and silence. You understand."

CHAPTER XVIII.

TIME and silence! What will they not do, and undo indeed? And what may not a jest, a bagatelle, do also? It would seem, in this strange phantasmagoria called human life, that the veriest whim, the airiest fancy, may sometimes shape itself into the destiny of mortals, when often the uphill endeavour of years and the patient, toilsome hopes of half a lifetime prove barren and ineffective. Be this as it may, certain it is that we see our fellows sometimes strangely fated by "trifles light as air." The solution of such problems may be in the fact that it is only exceptional human nature that goes out of the ordinary groove even so far as wishing, dreaming, or freaking, and that the destiny of those who stand thus aloof from ordinariness must be out of the common way.

Somehow the romantic or heroic element will manifest itself. After that conversation between Hilda and her lover, followed a succession of surprises, or what seemed surprises, taking their breath away, dumbfounding them, and rendering disclosure impossible. Even their secret and its responsibilities were now thrust into the background.

In the turn affairs had now taken at the Schloss, it was impossible for them to come forward; and delay, of course, made disclosure doubly and trebly difficult. In the first place the blind old duke died suddenly,

and no sooner were the funeral ceremonies over, than news came of the death of the sickly lad who had been his heir. The lovers were now pushed into a conspicuous place, and every thought, every moment, belonged for the time to others.

Hilda, by the side of her pseudo-aunt, the duchess, found herself compelled to perform the part of daughter of the house. Nor did the fame of these girlish graces and endowments remain in the little court. Remote kinsfolk of the house wanted to make the acquaintance of this brilliant girl, who up till the present time had been buried in the school-room. The gratification was enormous that at last a house particularly unendowed by Nature in the female line should at last have produced a paragon. Her advent was the luckiest thing in the world under present circumstances. What might not a clever, gifted, handsome woman accomplish for the family fortunes, long at a low ebb? Especially happy, too, the finding of such a bride for the new duke, a plain, blunt soldier, with hardly a word to say for himself. So at least gossiped the friendly kinsfolk of the bride and bridegroom elect. The time for the marriage was fixed, wedding presents and congratulations began to pour in. The marriage settlements were being drawn up. How could Waldemar speak out? Difficult as disclosure had been in the beginning, it seemed wholly impracticable now. Such an affair could not be kept dark. All the country would be set a tittering, and the story once noised abroad could nevermore be silenced or forgotten. It was this feeling that made the young soldier's cheek flame and his veins tingle. He felt able to brave scorn, indignation, even contempt, but not the shame born of ridicule. He

was ready to affront and defy his kinsfolk and his people by marrying a peasant, but he shrank from the notion of becoming a laughing-stock. The dupe of his kinswoman, the apparent victim of an intrigue, the sport of the woman he loved! It was not to be borne.

Had Hilda been a mere piece of irreproachable feminine ordinariness, disentanglement might have been feasible. Had she as nearly matched her foster-sister in parts and lineaments, a re-exchange for the time being might have been effected; the engagement with his cousin, the real Hildegarde, broken off; and later, honestly and before all the world, dame Anna's granddaughter made his bride. But this delicious impostor was peerless. She could no more be matched among all living womankind than we can match the sunset dyes of yestreen. It was then to necessity that the enraptured lover turned at last. He could not do otherwise than be foolishly happy.

And Hilda! Her satisfaction knew no bounds. She had never felt his scruples. She had always believed in the innocence of her jest.

"Do you know what I had determined to do?" she asked of her adorer when all was settled. "On waking up once more to find myself dame Anna's granddaughter, I intended to study for the stage, and act there the grand parts denied to me in real life. That would have been a consolation."

"I hope not," was the lover-like reply. "At any rate, it would not have consoled me."

"Then you would have proved yourself a poor creature," retorted Hilda, dominating, lording it over the whole world always.

Least of all were Hildegarde and Dr. Edouard

likely to find fault with the turn affairs had taken. The self-reliant, somewhat arrogant young doctor had made up his mind that the result was to be no other-wise long ago. This timid, fawn-like thing that had fled to his sheltering arms for love and protection, should never be torn from him.

"Never fear," he had said, when disquieting news would at first come from Hilda. "If any attempt be made to force your will, I have the remedy in my own hands." Whereupon he would point to the map of America.

"There are neither dukelings nor princelings there," he added; "and, but for my good mother and sisters, in the new democratic world my home would have been made long ago." When he heard that matters were to take their smooth course he showed no emotion. He had already fallen in with the sentiment of Hilda's epigram, "Exchange is no robbery. Why not be happily fated even by a jest?"

So on the very same day a brilliant wedding pageant took place at the court, and the simplest possible bridals were solemnized at a little country town far away. And, needless to say, had any person known who cared to tell that the bride of Dr. Edouard was a daughter of the royal house, and that the beautiful and incomparable duchess was her peasant-born foster-sister, who would have believed the story?"

A JAPANESE BRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

MOST travellers have been whirled at some time or the other of their lives, many again and again, by night express train from Geneva to Paris, though none, I venture to say, have as good cause for remembering any especial journey as myself. What took place upon a certain occasion now nearly three years ago, and the strange story of which that night's experience formed the prologue, I will endeavour to relate as briefly as possible. No additions, were I enabled to make them, could indeed lend fictitious charm or interest to such a narrative, nor is it necessary to exaggerate in the smallest particular by way of heightening the effect. The lights and shadows are there naturally. The picture, to use a technical phrase, seems to have composed itself.

I had halted the night before at the little town of Bourg-en-Bresse, that shrine of Renaissance art in the heart of a French Bœotia, and here the Geneva express at midnight picked me up in company with another straggler or two. It was early in October, just when the great tide of tourists sets in from Switzer-

land; and as the train was crowded, and the stoppage of a few minutes only, we had to bestow ourselves and our belongings where we could. Not a moment to spare for choosing a smoking, much less a half-filled carriage. I took possession of the first empty seat I could find, therefore, tenanted by four ladies and a youth of fifteen. The lad, who served to keep me in countenance, was the only one of the party asleep, and, before settling down to follow his example, I glanced round at the rest. Two of my fellow-travellers called for no remark, being simply a highly-respectable English lady and her maid. The other two immediately arrested my attention.

Mistress and maid were here also, but offering two distinct types, fascinating alike to both the student of beauty and of race, painter and ethnologist. The maid was a young Hindoo girl, whose brilliant complexion and naïve graces were heightened by the richness of her purely Oriental dress. The mistress was a young Japanese, dressed with that scrupulous elegance and minute observance of fashion seen in Frenchwomen and a few Americans. Everything, judged according to the latest canons of the mantua-maker and the milliner, was as it should be, the general effect in the eyes of the artistic beholder being somewhat perplexing, and perhaps unsatisfactory. Such beauty as hers—beauty of the languorous, sensuous type—needed more freedom, more expansion in outward lendings than Parisian fashion books allowed. She should have worn flowing drapery, bright hues, fanciful adornments in abundance; instead of all this she was put into the most prosaic of woman's disguises, whilst, to make matters worse, her abundant hair was twisted into a

microscopic knot at the back of her head, as the fashion of the day ordained, surmounted by an absurd bit of millinery called a bonnet. It was evident that every possible effort had been made, in fact, to translate her from a Japanese beauty into a young lady of fashion and the world.

A beauty she undoubtedly was, reminding me of those wonderfully lovely Japanese types I had seen a few weeks before in the ethnological section of the Paris Exhibition. Few who were at the trouble of visiting a certain little pavilion in the gardens of the Trocadéro can surely have forgotten the impression produced on their minds by the series of portraits there exhibited from Japan—all, be it remembered, portraits from the life. I had now before me a living prototype of an especial kind of loveliness that had there taken my breath away—a loveliness sensuous, almost voluptuous, yet imbued with the artless witchery and unconscious winningness of childhood. One hardly felt that there was a soul there, much less intellect, only a heart to be made happy by outward things.

“Keep your admiration to yourself,” whispered a friendly voice close in my ear. “She speaks English and French as well as we do. You shall hear her talk.”

It was the middle-aged matron who, under pretext of getting at her bag, thus good-naturedly took note of my growing interest in our outlandish neighbour. Then, as it was about the time for refreshment, she brought out wine and sandwiches, and offered them to the young beauty, evidently bent on bringing her out. They talked in French, a language which always seems to come natural when addressing foreigners.

"You must eat and drink," began the motherly English lady, pleased at the other's naïve acceptance of her hospitality. "You will have need of all your strength for the fatigues of sight-seeing in Paris."

The young Japanese smiled.

"Yes, I am to see everything that can be seen in Paris, and after that London and everything to be seen there. Then my education will stop, and high time too."

"And then?" was written in unmistakable characters on the face of her interlocutor, who, however, too well-bred to question, merely replied, suggestively, "You must, of course, feel very happy at the notion of seeing your own country and your own people once more."

"But I am not going to see my own country people," rejoined the girl, without the slightest touch either of longing or regret in her voice. "I remain in your country."

"I hope indeed that you will like England," said the elder lady, now dying with curiosity, yet refraining from a downright question.

"*Qui sait?*" was the careless reply. "But there is no help for it." Then she added in the same voice of happy unconcern, not un-mixed with something we should call worldliness if we were speaking of an English or French woman—the word seems inapplicable to a Japanese!—I am going to marry a rich Englishman."

My matter-of-fact countrywoman absolutely blushed with astonishment; I became at once more intensely absorbed than ever, whilst the heroine of our little nocturnal romance went on.

"It was he who wished me to be educated, and for that purpose I was sent to Switzerland three years ago. I was then fifteen, I am now eighteen, and I am to be married before the year is out."

"And then you will be an Englishwoman," said her neighbour, delighted with that candid confession.

"Could I not pass for an Englishwoman now?" asked the young lady, with charming innocence. "Is there still anything of the Japanese about me?"

"I think no one could ever outgrow his nationality, be it English, French, or Japanese," was the reply. "Why should you wish to lose every trace of yours?"

"I do not wish it. I only want to look and behave like an English lady. It is his wish, the wish of the gentleman I am about to marry. I did not care about it myself. I should have been perfectly content to rest as I was."

Thus she prattled on, encouraged by the ready sympathy of her travelling companion; after a time, however, she declared herself drowsy; the little Hindoo sprang forward at a sign to spread warm wraps over her mistress. Our little lamp was curtained, and all drowsed from time to time, all, alas! but the poor little Hindoo girl. Whenever I opened my eyes, I beheld the poor child murmuring to herself, "So cold, so cold," and in the act of gathering her thin silk shawl closer round her. The night was very chilly, she was clad in raiment of almost transparent fineness, and had nothing in the way of warmer clothing. I glanced from her to her mistress, so softly enshrined and luxuriously covered, and wondered when she would notice her handmaid's forlorn condition. But though she woke up from time to time, and even beckoned

the girl to bestow the fur rug more carefully about her own feet, she paid no heed whatever to her little shivering gesture and the low plaint. It seemed as if indeed she neither saw nor heard the little thing, and only became mindful of her presence when needing a service. I confess I was somewhat taken aback by what I was loth to believe a want of feeling; it might be, so at last I reasoned, that the young waiting-woman alone was to blame, and that, in accordance with the customs of Japan, domestic servants were expected to look after themselves; or it might be that her young mistress lacked not heart indeed, only a habit of caring for others. She was a spoiled child. I settled the matter thus. Seeing, moreover, that no help was likely to come from other quarters, I handed the poor child a spare plaid, and also proffered some refreshments, all of which were eagerly accepted.

As the train sped on, everyone grew drowsier and drowsier, only waking up at the last moment. No more conversation took place, and in the railway station I lingered to take, as I thought, a final glance of my beautiful Japanese bride-elect.

CHAPTER II.

SOME months passed and it is hardly necessary to say that the vision of the Japanese beauty, and her gorgeously clad attendant soon faded wholly from my memory. Greatly as I had been struck with her appearance on that nocturnal journey, the impression, vivid though it had been, faded from want of renewal.

Other romances, other beauties, had obliterated this one.

She became to me—though for that one night I confess myself to have been desperately in love—as if she had never been.

What was my astonishment, therefore, to receive early in the spring, the following note from my friend Ellerton, the sculptor:—

“DEAR STEVENS,

“You, as well as the rest of my friends, must have wondered what has become of me during the past few months. Come down any day you like, and be introduced to my Japanese bride. We returned only a week ago from our bridal tour.

“Yours,

“F. E.

“We can give you a bed.”

Now I think anyone else would have jumped to the same conclusion as myself. My friend's wife must be the heroine of that journey from Bourg-en-Bresse to Geneva! There could not certainly be two Englishmen infatuated enough to have brought over to Europe a little Japanese school-girl to be trained as the fitting mistress of an imposing, if not wealthy English home. I use the word imposing advisedly, for no other can aptly characterise Ellerton's house. Vast, airily proportioned, framed, and fitted up on a scale suited to the large handsome person, and widely-cultured facile character of the owner, it no more resembled any other place I know of than he did anyone else I had ever seen. He had purchased a bit of land and built

his house in a village bordering on the New Forest, and it seemed rather a palace designed for the denizens of that vast pleasure-ground, than the dwelling of an English artist, however favoured of fortune.

"I must have space enough for ample play of light and shadow; small rooms are the ruin of sculptors," he had said, and accordingly he had sacrificed everything else to proportion. It must be admitted that the general effect was a little cold. You felt at first as if you had strayed into an art gallery! Ellerton's ineffable geniality, however, and Ellerton's many-sidedness always animated the place, and made it glow. Without him it was unbearable. I never knew any human being who could so strongly influence his surroundings. With a vein of singularity in his character, at all times allowed full play, he was one of those men whom fortune and the world have done their best to spoil. Yet there was strength underlying this odd mixture of genius and whimsicality, for in spite of being born rich, gracious, and winning, in spite of being thrown by virtue of birth and social position chiefly among idlers, he had achieved more downright honest work than most men of his age. To name Ellerton, the sculptor, was to name a man indeed, in whose productions all true artists had faith. Everyone loved, none pretended to understand him, and this Japanese marriage was but of a piece with the *bizarrierie* of his whole career.

Wondering how it would answer, my mind full of Ellerton and his bride, I travelled next day to Lyndhurst, and arrived just in time for a chat with my host before dinner.

It was brilliant March weather, and the cold vast

landscape without was in keeping with the almost interminable perspectives within. In spite of the blazing wood fires everywhere, and the abundance of crimson hanging, I shivered. There are some English houses you can never warm, and this was one.

"Ah!" said Ellerton, with the warmest greeting, "you have lost no time, I see. Like the rest of my friends you are dying with curiosity to be presented to my Japanese bride." Then reading, I suppose, a questioning look in my face, he added, "You want, of course, to know why I went so far in search of an ideal, why I married this lady. I will tell you in a very few words. Simply and solely because she is the most bewitching creature to look at I had ever seen throughout the course of my existence."

I listened, all attention, and being one of Ellerton's oldest friends had expected his confidence in this matter. If not with me, indeed, with whom should he be confidential?

"I hold theories, as you know, which seem fanciful enough in the eyes of most people," he went on, "and none more so than with regard to beauty as a moral factor in man's existence. I maintain that beauty of itself is a virtue, wholly irrespective of any ethical quality residing in it or emanating from it; and that lovers of beauty, artists at least, should not concern themselves with any other. For the true artist there is neither good nor bad, noble nor abject, in the moral world, only beautiful and ugly; and his duty is to seek the first and avoid the last, regardless of consequences. Thus, since the thought of marrying entered my head, I fully determined to choose for my wife, not the best bred, nor the wittiest, nor the most

fascinating woman of my acquaintance, but simply the loveliest. I said to myself—when I find my ideal of beauty, then I will marry, and if not then, never!’

I felt now convinced that I was about to be introduced to the beauty of that nocturnal adventure, and Ellerton’s next few sentences confirmed my belief. In a few glowing words he described how he had found his long-sought paragon of female loveliness in an out-of-the-way Japanese village.

“You will marvel, I dare-say,” he said, “that I did not leave her the wild rose she was; but no, Stevens, I could not live with a woman, no matter how I adored her, who should shock me in small matters of taste. She must be fastidiously nice with regard to those social observations we Europeans are wedded to. My friends, my servants, and the world must discern no flaw in the lady I make mistress of my house. This is why I sent the poor child to Switzerland in order to learn English, French, and the ways of the world. How apt a pupil she has proved you will see presently. She is amply repaid for all the drudgery she has gone through, and I am more than compensated for the long separation. Her taste is perfect, and only wanted guidance. There is in fact but one drawback to a most felicitous union——”

He stopped short, looked round in order to assure himself that we were alone, then added, in a low voice,

“She has no sympathy for my art. Sculpture is more than dumb and meaningless to her, it is gruesome and repellent—a cold, death-in-life—that chills her to the very veins, and even the beauty of which is full of awe. Artistic, rather, perhaps I should say, ele-

gant in her tastes, she has taken kindly to every other phase of her new life but this."

A look of positive trouble came over his face, and with a sudden change of voice, as if anxious to be rid of painful thoughts, he said:

"But now let us go to the drawing-room, where Mya awaits us."

Accordingly we ascended the almost palatial staircase, and crossing a corridor, from which the mistress of the house had evidently removed some statuary familiar to me on former occasions, we entered the drawing-room.

I had, of course, prepared myself to recognise, though not to be recognised in my turn: nor was I mistaken. The lady advancing to meet me so smilingly was the same I had travelled with on that vividly remembered night, but she had naturally then taken no heed of the muffled stranger occupying a seat at the other end of the carriage. We were formally introduced to each other, and, a few minutes later, I led her down to dinner.

Our conversation—must I admit it of Ellerton's board?—was a trifle conventional. Ellerton seemed for the first time in his existence compelled to talk in a circle; and, although gay and genial, naturally lost much thereby as a talker. Perhaps he would have felt just the same necessity of limiting his subjects, had he married an Englishwoman exactly half his age. Certainly, on ordinary topics—the literature of the day, foreign travel, English scenery—his wife could converse as freely, and with as much spirit, as if she had been accustomed to such table-talk all her life.

Whilst we chattered therefore, lightly and plea-

santly, over our elegant little dinner, I was observing my hostess with no small interest and curiosity. In so far as mere beauty went—rich, warm, sensuous beauty—needless to say that the woman outshone the child, the bride surpassed the girl-*fiancée*! A certain shy coquetry of maidenhood was replaced by an easy *aplomb*, an almost audacious candour even more becoming; whilst a glance told me that in all matters of social routine and etiquette she was entire mistress of herself. From her manner as hostess and lady of the house, it was hard to believe that she had not been used all her life to the elegancies of an English home, and the society of men and women of the world.

Mya!" Ellerton said, "show Stevens the bracelet I designed for you as a wedding gift. I am quite proud of it."

She did not take off the bracelet, but let me see it as it circled on her arm, with the fingers of her right hand indicating the fine workmanship of the monogram in pearls and diamonds.

I now noticed for the first time that this lovely woman wanted one attraction I have ever been slave to; namely, the white, blue-veined, dimpled hand of a well-bred Englishwoman. I felt a positive impatience with these thin, brown—I must even say tawny—fingers; and wished that the incomparable Mya would always wear mittens!

No, I could never reconcile myself to a woman without beautiful white hands. I no longer envied my friend Ellerton the wonderfully lovely face ever before him as a picture.

"Well?" he asked, when we retired to his study

for a cigar, the sound of Mya's piano reaching us where we sat. "Well?"

"You have not exaggerated," I said, warmly; "I find her all and more than you say."

"She is an exquisite creature, and she loves me. What more should a man seek in a wife—at least, such a man as myself?"

He did well to qualify the sentence, for certainly most of us do require a little sympathy in this, above all other relations of life. But Ellerton's singularity might well except him from the common rule. He perhaps sufficed for himself. I fancied he seemed to breathe more freely when we were alone. And he became more animated, which was no wonder, seeing that now, for the first time, we talked of his art.

"To-morrow, ah! I have something to show you to-morrow," he said, archly and joyously. "I have achieved a marvellous triumph, perhaps for the first time realising, in marble, exactly the conception of my brain. How seldom does that happen even to the true artist?"

Much we talked of his work, and of this especial piece of work in particular, till an imperious little lady in black velvet with gold trimmings summoned us to tea.

CHAPTER III.

ELLERTON had built himself a superb sculpture gallery as well as a studio on the same handsome scale, and next morning we spent several hours there, my friend having much to show me. He had bought largely and worked hard since my last visit rather more than a year ago. The gallery was enriched with several fine antiques, and the studio with some lovely things.

"Nothing stimulates artistic creativeness like being in love," Ellerton said, laughingly, and, certes, I have never known him so prolific in good work. The artist seemed to have flung out his fancies at random, merely to rid himself of them; to have glowed under a redundancy of intellectual force and fancy. Wonderfully beautiful things were here, some finished, others mere embryo, a few in the half-way stage between the bud and the flower. One group, covered with a crimson cloth, stood on a pedestal at the farther end of the studio.

With his hand on the drapery, Ellerton stood still for a moment smiling at my expectancy, glowing beforehand with the consciousness of well-earned praise to come. Then, lifting the curtain, he said—I fancy his lips trembled with emotion whilst he spoke—

"By this, or nothing, I shall be remembered. Here is my title of honour."

I saw before me the oft-embodied, beauteous legend

of Pygmalion and his dream-bride,—but what matter how often such a theme is handled by the genuine artist? Here was a conception of warm life, passion, and beauty that must live, that must assert itself and its author's claims before all the world. Idle were it to try to describe these two figures. The sculptor bending forward to embrace the maiden, their faces nearly touching each other, their frames a-tremble with the joy of the first as yet untasted kiss. Enough to say that the spectator held his breath as he gazed, so intense, so unexpected, at the vision of loveliness before him. It struck me, as I gazed, that in Pygmalion, the sculptor, unconsciously without doubt, yet unmistakably, had portrayed himself, whilst in the figure of the awakened girl I could trace only the purest English type of beauty; and why, indeed, should English sculptors seek any other? There are English faces, and, though much rarer, English forms as perfect as those recalled to us by Greek art; whilst the artist, instead of giving us a mere copy, gives us his own ideal, his own embodiment, thus in reality creating for us.

Ellerton, much pleased with my praises, at length gently drew the curtain over the group.

“It is strange,” he said, as we were about to quit the studio, “Mya seems to have conceived almost a jealous dislike for this work. I suppose because I am so fond of it.”

This was said half playfully, yet with a sigh. I observed that he went out of his way to avoid allusions to it in the presence of his wife. But for this little cloud, however, there seemed the most perfect understanding between the pair. She had fallen quite easily into her place as lady of the house, fulfilling her

social duties, and directing the servants, as if to "the manner born." When luncheon was over, a neat little pony-carriage was brought to the door, and, with a servant at her side, she made her calls, and would drive into the neighbouring town to do her shopping. She got all the newest books from a subscription library, took up crewel work, painting on porcelain, and other fashionable feminine occupations; she studied music assiduously, cultivated the acquaintance of all the neighbours for miles round, and, in fine, showed an inordinate capacity for amusing herself. This must have been a great comfort to a hard-working man like Ellerton.

"You must positively stay till the end of the week," he said to me, when we separated after that first luncheon, he to work in his studio, I to take a long ramble in the New Forest.

"The Pygmalion is now quite finished, and I have invited a few friends in the neighbourhood to come and look at it, before it goes to the Academy. You have not a single plea to urge by way of excuse."

As I had not indeed! A *flâneur*, alas! by profession, I might as well be in the New Forest just then as anywhere else—anywhere else as in the New Forest. Ellerton had ever been, moreover, my most delightful friend—he was that to everybody. I had grown deeply interested in his Japanese bride. In need of no more urgent persuasion, were any more needed from such a host, I stayed. Mya was interesting me now from a wholly new point of view. I had begun by analysing her beauty; I had next studied her as a curious intellectual phenomenon; I finally set to work as a psychologist to anatomise her character. There were some

moral puzzles in it, not least of which was that curious aversion to her husband's art.

What was the origin of such aversion? Did it arise from instinct, passion, or want of artistic perception?

It might well be that this cold, pure sculpture world came as a mystery, painful almost as death itself, to a child of voluptuous skies and warm, richly-coloured outward existence; or it might be that she saw in this art of which her husband was so thoroughly the master, this art to which he was so passionately devoted, something that divided her from him only, and, as such, to be distrusted and even hated; or, lastly, it might be that in her, as in many, artistically speaking, defective natures, the faculty of appreciating form was wholly wanting, thus rendering her quite insensible to the charm of Ellerton's creations.

Be this as it may, it was quite evident that she made no effort to conceal her antipathy, and that every expression of it caused Ellerton to wince. In spite of the passionate love on his part, the kittenish fondness in hers, a cloud already hovered over them, palpable to others. Would it vanish as it had come? would it break over their heads? This was the question I asked myself again and again as the hours glided by under their pleasant roof. The reception in honour of the statues destined for the Royal Academy had been put off for a few days, and I was pressed to stay on. There seemed no reason for going, so I stayed, every day getting a clearer insight, as I thought, into the character of my friend's wife.

On the eve of the reception, I strayed into the studio to see the effect of Ellerton's final arrangements.

It was one of those pearly March twilights, peculiarly beautifying to a sculptor's work-room. The limpid atmosphere lent an ample play of light and shadow to the graceful outlines and smooth white surface of the marble, whilst the swift-stealing twilight, fading from warm soft violets to cold hard greys, soon filled the place with poetic awe and mystery.

As I lingered in this dream-land, I heard a voice at my elbow calling my name, and, looking up, saw the sculptor's beautiful bride, her dusky loveliness heightened by dress of purest white, only the sparkle of a diamond here and there relieving its diaphanous folds.

She approached me where I stood, and, having our faces turned from it, we rested our elbows on the sill and gazed down the long vista peopled with white shadowy forms, standing still boldly out of the gathering gloom.

"How can you come here? How can you stay here?" she asked, drawing her white lace shawl round her as if suddenly cold. "It is to me a region of phantoms from some spirit world. They hardly live, yet who can call them dead? They are dumb, yet to me they all seem possessed of a strange speech."

"Then," I replied, with a smile, "why do you come here? Why do you stay?"

"Because I am fascinated against my will; I feel enticed towards this room, above all others in the house, just because it makes me uneasy. Do you know?" she said, turning to me suddenly, "I think, Mr. Stevens, that my husband and I inhabit two wholly different worlds. This is his. It never can be mine. His life, his soul, his heart, are here."

She lifted her hand in the direction of the Pygmalion, the stooping lover, the upraised maiden, still discernible in the creeping dusk, and added—

“I may be childish, perhaps whimsical, but these fancies disturb my peace and make me wretched. Oh! a sculptor needs no living love since his ideal exists in marble.”

“But the artistic ideal is perpetually varying, whilst love lasts a lifetime,” I replied, adding playfully, “Take comfort in the thought that the statue yonder is to be removed to-morrow, and, unless you wish it, need never come under your eyes again.” She was silent, as if musing on my words, which, however, seemed in no degree to reassure her.

“Are all sculptors thus absorbed in their work?” she asked.

“All true artists like Ellerton must be,” I replied, with emphasis. “Were he one shade less devoted to his art, he would not hold the high position he now does by virtue of splendid achievements.”

“He is rich. He does not need the money,” she said, almost as if talking to herself.

“And were he a bis-millionaire, it would be the same to him as to any other man of genius,” I replied, warmly. “No, Mrs. Ellerton, your husband’s intellectual life is indeed here, and proud must you feel that it is so.”

“Would nothing wrench him from these pursuits?” she asked, the words showing me the track of thought she was following. “You are, he tells me, his oldest friend. Speak candidly the thought in your mind. Will one phantom after another continue to shut me out of my husband’s heart?”

Before I could answer, Ellerton's voice on the threshold summoned us gaily to dinner.

CHAPTER IV.

NEXT morning at breakfast Ellerton handed to his wife a little gilt-edged note with a handsome monogram, and said—

“You must look your very best to-day, for among our guests is to figure a royal princess.”

Then, while she read the missive, he turned to me, adding—

“The Princess——is staying at Lord ——'s close by, and I must of course graciously accept the honour she proposes doing me. Well?” he asked, glancing at Mya.

The little lady looked as if inclined to pout.

“The princess comes to see the sculptor's statues, not his wife,” she said, with disdain; “I need not appear at all.”

“Nonsense,” Ellerton urged, coaxingly; “I have set my mind on your wearing the peony-coloured brocade dress, with the waist-clasp and aigrette of antique gold and rubies. As to your hair to-day I will dress it for you; for no one else can do it so well.”

That little speech seemed to make matters smooth, and, the moment breakfast was over, Mya set to work on her preparations, apparently in the highest spirits. I helped her to carry flowers from the conservatory for the decoration of the staircase and studio, making myself generally useful till luncheon. Directly after, Mya disappeared to go through the mysteries of the

toilet, and we did not meet again till three o'clock, when the guests began to arrive.

There is always an apogee in social gatherings, and one tableau out of the shifting groups in Ellerton's studio that afternoon remains photographed on my memory.

It was towards the close of the reception when the most illustrious guests are always sure to arrive; and, in this case, the coming of the royal princess and her train added the last touch to a scene of unusual brilliance. The guests, numbering upwards of thirty, had fallen back, now forming a semicircle before the Pygmalion, the princess and the sculptor standing a little in advance of the rest, whilst he spoke of his work and listened to her praises.

The magnificence of the ladies' dresses, all of rich material and warm colours as became the season, contrasted strikingly with the coldness and purity of the marbles, whilst a blaze of colour even more dazzling than that of jewels and brocade was afforded by the abundance of hot-house flowers on every side. It was inevitable that Ellerton's beautiful Japanese bride should undergo momentary eclipse. Perhaps the handsomest woman in the room, and certainly the only one exquisitely dressed, she had nevertheless been compelled like the rest to make way for her husband's illustrious guest—no daughter of England, but of a royal house allied distantly with our own, and herself, Italian on her mother's side, betrothed to a foreign nobleman.

This young lady, standing by Ellerton, was particularly distinguished from the others by the simplicity of her dress, a white felt hat with nothing in the shape of ornament but a spray of jewels, and a long white

fur-lined cashmere cloak, being all that was observable. She was tall and graceful, and her pearly complexion, exquisite fairness, and pure contour might well commend themselves to a sculptor. Ellerton was evidently fascinated by her appearance, and perhaps saw, or fancied he saw, as I think everyone did in the room, a certain shadowy resemblance to the beautiful statue before her.

And just as the attitude of the lovers in marble,—the bending artist, the upraised maiden,—was that of eager, passionate expectation, so now Ellerton's face glowed at the lady's praises, whilst her own, uplifted to his, beamed over with sympathetic ardour and delight.

The likeness, fantastic though it might be, was apparent a few minutes only. When the semicircle was broken to make way for Ellerton and his royal guest, and the brilliant company streamed into the hall where tea awaited us, every trace of the illusion had vanished.

Except from the jealous mind of Mya! I noted her flushed cheek and the quick, uneasy glances she directed towards her husband as he still hovered, being in duty bound so to do, by the side of the princess. Not that she was any longer eclipsed, for all present seemed vying with each other to do homage to their host's unique and fascinating bride. But these observances scarcely seemed to gratify her, and, if there was a world of injured feeling in her looks, none the less was there abundance of wistfulness. Ellerton all this time remained wholly unconscious of his wife's state of mind. I had never seen him gayer, or more genial. He was enjoying an artistic triumph, prologue of a nobler triumph to come, and his flushed cheek, sparkling eye and beaming smile made him doubly

gracious and doubly handsome. Seizing an opportunity, I went up to Mya's side and tried to engage her in conversation. Using the privilege of her husband's oldest friend, I praised everything—her dress, the tea-table, the general arrangements.

“Will it soon be all over?” she asked, with a look of inexpressible *ennui*. “I do not feel at home; I cannot understand the conversation of these people and their way of looking at things! To hear them talk one might suppose there was nothing to live for but sculpture and painting. Are they only acting a part, or do they really live in a world which is not real and tangible?”

This question, by no means an easy one to answer, showed no little perspicuity on Mya's part. Sure enough, to judge from the conversation of all present, an outsider might well suppose that the full significance, the real strength and vitality of existence, lay here. How could I make clear to her the subtle distinction she could not see? How could I explain that art is indeed a life and a world in itself, most real, most tangible to the true devotee, not a hollow image substituted for the true one, but a counterpart and an addition? There were true critics, true art-lovers among Ellerton's visitors, and thus it came about that the conversation had been of an unusually intense nature. No mere conventional utterances were these, but the fervid thoughts of men and women who felt art, and to whom it represented the highest and best phase of human intellect. I was about to answer, when the young princess, with extreme, almost affectionate graciousness, moved towards her hostess.

“You must, indeed, be proud of your husband's

great work," she said, taking her hand and perusing her with curious interest, "and, when it is the admiration of the whole world, you will be prouder still!"

"You are very kind," Mya said, smiling and bowing, nevertheless, as in duty bound. The perfect self-possession and almost marble-like coldness of the princess, needless to say, a woman of the world, although but twenty-two, contrasted strangely with the underlying, yet ill-concealed restlessness and fieriness of the Japanese beauty. It was plain enough, at least to me, that here only a spark was needed to kindle the smouldering ashes into flame. Mere outsiders might well take these serpentine wreathings of her lissome form, these twitches of the beautiful lips, these side-looks and blushes to mean common shyness and ingenuousness only.

The princess, fearing to embarrass her hostess further, now took her leave, and her going was the signal for a general dispersion. The rest of the day, as is usually the case after a period of excitement, was unusually quiet, and we all retired to rest earlier than usual, Ellerton declaring himself quite worn out with the hard work of the last few weeks.

"But the climax rewards me," he said, as he caught the bed-room candle: "the Pygmalion is sold. It is to adorn a royal museum in Italy. Could higher praise be awarded to any English work of art?"

I congratulated him heartily and looked round for Mya, but she was gone.

"My wife is sadly tired with the long day's fatigue. Excuse her abrupt departure," Ellerton said, kindly. Then we bade each other good night and went each on our way.

CHAPTER V.

I SLEPT uneasily, troubled, I knew not why, with vague presentiments of evil. Ellerton, favourite school comrade and oldest friend, was so dear and so very interesting to me—we must love our friends in proportion to the interest with which they inspire us—that I could not discern a cloud on his horizon without a feeling of pain and apprehension. This sunny-tempered, joyous, joy-inspiring nature had never yet been harrassed by trouble or real personal sorrow. Truth to tell, he had hitherto been a spoilt child of fortune, of his friends, and of the world generally. On this airy, enthusiastic, ever buoyant temperament, it seemed unfair to lay the burden of a care. He must be happy because he so relished happiness, and because it so well became him. Thus it came about that these fleeting visions of trouble in store for Ellerton disturbed me more, perhaps, than any personal chagrin of my own would have done. I was made of tougher material, and could better bear the stings and buffetings of evil fortune. I was, moreover, much less given to a romantic expectation and visions of unalloyed felicity. What effect a disenchantment regarding his marriage would be, I dreaded to contemplate. For I saw that a terrible revelation was in store for him. This world of art, this life within life, which was his, and never would be hers, must estrange husband and wife. Her woman's jealousy would have its way, and it was directed against what was dearer far to him even than love and life itself, namely, his art.

I had seen clearly enough during the past week, and Mya had doubtless vaguely discovered it too, that by this capricious marriage Ellerton had sought rather to adorn and beautify, than to strengthen and complete his existence. He sufficed for himself. What he had sought in a wife was a toy, brilliant, flawless, unique. How would it fare with him when too late he should find out the flaw?

It was such thoughts as these that made my dreams feverish and the oft-broken hours of sleep seem almost interminable to me. When at last the cold, luminous March dawn came, I rose, and throwing on a wrapper opened the window; an inhalation of pure air often acting as a sedative.

My chamber overlooked the eastern side of the pretty little domain, a bare sweep of turf, planted with ornamental shrubs, along which a narrow path led to a side gate opening on to the high road. Beyond slope and shrubs rose a clump of magnificent old trees, and between the bare branches could be discerned glimpses of the New Forest, one vast panorama, its vast serrated outline recalling mountain scenery. Just such purple undulations as these, with towering summit and deep clefts, greet the traveller in the highlands of the Jura and Auvergne.

In the sharp, silvery light of this bright spring dawn, not a feature of the wide landscape was lost, and I was gazing on it in admiration, when two small, bending figures suddenly broke its wonderful, almost solemn silence and stillness.

The figures in question were not more than a hundred yards from me, that is to say, they were hastening along the narrow path, before mentioned,

towards the road. It was impossible for me not to recognise the slight, somewhat conspicuously dressed figures at a glance; and I do not know why the sight of Mya, abroad at that hour in company with her little maid, should have struck me with something like dismay.

The little lady of the house had only been seized with a sudden desire to ramble in the New Forest at dawn, and she was subject to caprices. This was but in keeping with the rest.

The pair, moreover, were furnished with baskets—Japanese baskets of unusual size—and it occurred to me, as a happy solution of this enigma, that they were bent on simpling. Mya had set her mind on culling some herb of rare excellence with which to make cosmetics, or, who knows? some beautifying collyrium for eyes sore with weeping; or (I allowed my fancy full play) she might be in quest of some love-herb, which, carefully decocted, should make whole her husband's heart?

Still, I confess, this vagary on the part of my hostess inspired me with uneasiness. I longed for breakfast time to bring a solution of the mystery, occupying the interval with snatches of sleep and vivid dreams; the picturesque pair, scuttling along the garden walk, forming the central figure of each. When at last the breakfast-gong sounded and I went downstairs, it was to find Ellerton alone.

"It seems we must breakfast *en garçon*," he said, with an annoyed look. "Mya has taken it into her head to go out for a walk, and has not yet returned."

I looked at the time-piece on the mantel-shelf

which pointed to nine, and, I suppose, arched my eyebrows, for Ellerton said:

“You could not have heard the garden-gate click at your side of the house? I have no idea, myself, at what time they started.”

I hesitated for a moment, and then told him what I had seen.

The expression of annoyance deepened into one of concern. He sat down, however, and poured out the coffee for us both, drinking his own hastily, and only accompanied by a morsel of bread.

“It must be but a caprice,” he said, deprecatingly, yet with uneasy glances down the grand walk, and at the time-piece. “A vagary! Yet the New Forest is so vast and so intricate that I cannot bear the notion of her being there with only the little Hindoo girl. What if they should lose their way? or fall in with rough people, and Mya has a habit of wearing so many jewels! It was a foolish freak on her part——”

He did not say—“I cannot understand it.” I saw quite well that something unpleasant had happened the day before; that, in fact, for the first time the adoring husband had been ruffled by his lovely bride.

“And I am bidden to lunch at Lord ——’s to meet the princess. How can I fulfil my engagement unless Mya be back by noon?”

“Perhaps their large baskets meant a picnic *à deux*?” I suggested. “The weather is fine enough to breakfast out of doors in a sheltered spot.”

“No,” he replied, his face growing darker and darker. “I fear some more serious purpose is at the bottom of this step. We had an unhappy misunder-

standing last night, and, would you believe it, about a statue?" I showed no surprise at such a statement. "You had divined as much?" he went on. "Then you were less blind than myself. This child of Nature, for so she has ever remained in spite of the conventional gloss my so-called education has imparted, this incomparable *ingénue* deemed me enamoured of a statue! That exquisite marble ideal of my fancy became a hateful rival to her, and she sees, in my fondness for it, an alienation from herself. And, to make matters worse, the fanciful theory was heightened yesterday by a resemblance she was pleased to find between the marble lady and the beautiful princess, our guest. I had but imagined in stone, my first, last, and only love! So she thinks. My wife is such a child that I can talk of her as I could not do were she an ordinary woman," he added, "and this childishness manifests itself not at all in intellectual things; she can apply herself—as you have seen—to wholly new lines of thought, and acquire quite foreign branches of knowledge, with extraordinary ease and rapidity. But she is a child, morally speaking, unable in the least degree to measure the consequences of her own acts, or her relations, as a responsible being, to others. And intellectually, though gifted largely with the power of perception and memory, she lacks the faculty of appreciating the relation of things, the due proportion necessary in balancing human affairs. She was disappointed to find that, instead of filling my life, she only occupied a subordinate place in it. My devotion to the sculptor's art first took her by surprise, then repelled her. But, for heaven's sake, Stevens, tell me what is to be done. Time is going. It must be five

hours or more since, according to your showing, they went away. I am really growing most uneasy."

The only possible thing to be done was to instigate a search in the forest under the pretext that Madame—as she was always called—must have gone out for a ramble with her Hindoo attendant and lost her way.

I hurried off, to strike out in one direction, an old man-servant was sent out in another. Ellerton was to follow us, taking a third, as soon as he had despatched a note of excuse to Lord ——, and attended to other matters in the house of immediate concern.

CHAPTER VI.

From Frank Ellerton to Carruthers Stevens.

"It is some months since that March night when, after a long day spent in my service, I so roughly, almost brutally, indeed, begged you to leave my home. The fact was, something had happened which was near maddening me, which, for the time being, did certainly deprive me of self-control, and on that account I wanted to be alone. I could not bear even my oldest friend to see me unmanned. To-day for the first time I take anyone into my confidence. I could not do so by word of mouth. I doubt, in fact, whether I shall ever have courage to speak of the matter at all; but it is a kind of unburdening to write of it freely to you, and of course my letter is for you alone. Immediately you had quitted the house that March morning, in order to search for the missing Mya and her Hindoo, I sat down and penned a hurried note of excuse to Lord B——.

I then gave one or two necessary orders to the servants, and was about to join in the search also, when an indefinable longing seized me to take a farewell look of my statue before it should be packed for transmission to the Academy. I felt as if a glance at the ineffable calm and mutely responsive beauty therein embodied would console me for the cruelty of the living love I had taken to my heart only to sting. Love is cruel, I thought, but art is kind; and art shall henceforth be my mistress, my salvation, and my comforter!

"Outside the door I stood for a moment with a sudden thrill of joy, and triumphant, foreseeing how the pearly spring light would beautify—almost etherealise—the marble, realising my sunniest aspirations and ripest experience. I felt that my work was good, so that I had reason to rejoice.

"I opened the door, and what was my horror and dismay to find, instead of the dream of loveliness with which my whole being was full, a torn, maimed, scarred, almost hideous thing! By some monstrous piece of wickedness, and also no little manual dexterity, my beautiful statue had been ruined past help. Nothing short of a miracle of the olden time could now restore it.

"I stood for some minutes contemplating the wreck like one in a dream, unable to move an inch or open my lips.

"Then, when I realised the true state of things, all the self-mastery went out of me for a moment, and I believe I burst into tears.

"No more of the deed, and only a few more words about the perpetrator. I have not taken the world into

my confidence with regard to either. No one knows why my much-talked-of Pygmalion never made its appearance at the Academy. Still less does anyone guess what part the sculptor's wife played in this year's shortcomings. Mya—thus much you may have heard—is living in Paris, and when you and other trusted emissaries were searching the New Forest, in bodily fear lest she had been murdered for the sake of her jewels, she was steaming from Southampton to Havre, bent only on whiling away a few days in the French capital till the wrath of her lord and master should pass away. She expected, indeed, to have cured me of statue-making for evermore, and to have enticed me to Paris, all adoration and repentance. I need not say that in these surmises she has been entirely out of her reckoning. I make her a sufficient allowance, and we are and shall ever remain, in other respects, strangers to each other. So much for my Japanese romance. When will you run down and see me? The New Forest is just now in full glory. The sooner the better, old friend.

“F. E.”

FERNANDE.

CHAPTER I.

BRIGHT, indeed, was the picture that met Fernande's sad eyes as she strolled along the quays of the fine old French city on the banks of the Loire that winter day. On one side the river, bristling with ships from all nations, flowed clear and swift towards the sea; on the other were handsome shops, their glittering wares already displayed to best advantage on account of the coming holiday; with gay equipages flashing by in the mild winter sunshine, and, far beyond the noble city and towering cathedral, the green river banks crowned by many a nestled chalet and modest spire. Of all French towns this ancient capital of Brittany is surely the most ingratiating and the most cheerful, alike in winter and summer.

Fernande, in spite of her heaviness of heart, felt the exhilaration of the scene, and, glad of any escape from her own thoughts, paused to look at everything. The heavily-freighted little steamers plying between the city and neighbouring villages, the foreign flags waving from the lofty masts of merchant-vessels, the bustle of the quays, the gay shop-windows, all attracted her at-

tention, though they were sights she gazed on every day. By-and-by, she sat down and watched a train come in; for between quay and boulevard, right through the heart of the town, runs the railway, adding still more to the animation of the picture.

It was a train from Paris, and as it glided slowly towards the station a curious and unexpected circumstance happened. Just opposite to the bench on which sat Fernande there appeared from one of the carriage windows a woman's hand—an exquisite, ungloved hand—from which fell, flying before the wind in all directions, little strips of printed paper. The lady herself remained invisible, evidently wishing not to be seen, though as long as the train continued on the quay the lovely little bare hand could be descried, and the tiny missives that fluttered from it, to the infinite diversion of the spectators.

Fernande rose eagerly to possess herself of one of the papers, but, in the act of stretching out her arms, it seemed like a butterfly to fly towards her, settling on her breast. She smiled, saying to herself that this should be a good omen, and, with eager eyes, read the following:—

“Madame Lorenzi, formerly of the Théâtre Français, will to-morrow evening give recitations from the dramatists, with a selection from living Breton poets.”

Sorrow in some natures is a sharpener of the faculties; and as Fernande sat conning these words, they seemed to suggest something of a hopeful nature to her. Like most of us in youth, she felt impatient of sorrow, and, having a large capacity for happiness, she felt ready to make any effort on her own behalf

and that of the one being she loved best in the world, her husband.

So she mused and mused, and, when she had made out a plan, rose and hastened away: no longer with slow, dragging steps, but with an elastic tread betokening cheerfulness. Nothing could be more modest than the little rooms in an old-fashioned quarter of the town constituting Fernande's home. Yet there were evidences of the happier auspices under which the young bride had entered on them two years ago. The cold hearth looked dreary enough now. The larder, Fernande knew, was nearly empty. But there were well-filled book-cases, a little piano, pictures on the walls, warm rugs covering the floor. The direst need only would compel the young husband and wife to part with these.

It was yet early in the afternoon, and a more prudent person than Fernande would have taken time for further thought before putting her design into execution. She would not, she could not wait a minute. Having sat with folded hands brooding over her troubles for weeks past, she now felt an impulse to hope and to act far too ardent to be checked. To-morrow, might not alike cheerfulness and enterprise fail her.

Unlocking a drawer of her husband's writing-table, she now very carefully drew forth a manuscript, bearing, alas! unmistakeable signs of having been sent forth into the cold world to see its fortunes again and again, in vain. Certain courteous little editorial pencillings here and there, certain slight evidences of wear and tear in the post-office, told its story but too well. Genius there might be here, but it was not of a kind

that as yet had touched the heart or inspired the mind of the critic.

Fernande smiled, however, as she gazed on the familiar page. There was but one poet in the world for her, at least one poet whose career formed a part of her existence, and she believed in the beauty of the poem before her now, as she had done in the first days of her marriage, when the reading of it and the hopes inspired by it had formed a new and sweeter link between the husband and wife.

"Ah! I shall do all that I always hoped to do now that I have you to inspire and encourage me," he had said, and she believed him, nursing all kinds of bright hopes, one by one to be dispelled.

To-day, however, no tears fell on the faded page. No sighs were breathed over those pencillings, so harmless in appearance, yet so fateful in reality. She caught the manuscript to her heart with a smile of rapture instead, and, hiding it under her shabby little shawl, again went out into the gay streets, this time not seeking the boulevard by the river, but the handsome square in the heart of the city where stood the principal hotels.

Stopping at the entrance of the first of these, she asked, with that confidence ever inspired by desperate circumstances, "Madame Lorenzi, is she staying here? Can I speak to her, if you please?"

"Yes, madame is here; permit me to take up your card," said the waiter, not, perhaps, without some suspicion of Fernande's errand. We tell our stories to the world so much oftener than we suppose! Then, taking the card from her ill-gloved hands, he tripped

lightly up the handsome staircase, leaving her in suspense below.

A few minutes later Fernande was herself ascending those wide, handsomely-carpeted stairs. After knocking two or three times (why is it that the first knock of the suppliant is seldom heard?) a rich, deep, but muffled voice bade her enter.

On opening the door, still too anxious and too concentrated on one fixed purpose to feel timid, Fernande found herself in the presence of the great artiste from Paris, the famous tragedian, the reciter of verse, who was said to have made the fortune and renown of more than one young poet of the day by the mere recital of a few stanzas.

An organ so sonorous, so full and varied in tone as that of the famous Madame Lorenzi could not belong to a person of mean appearance, and Fernande had come prepared to admire some one quite unlike any woman of her acquaintance. Nor was she disappointed. This magnificent creature was so large, so imposing, so majestic, that the poor child began to feel a crushing sense of her own inferiority by comparison, also an almost paganish veneration, as if she must go down on her knees and kiss those exquisite white hands in token of the humblest worship.

But at that moment no kind of salutation was possible, and had Fernande been in any other mood she would have smiled at the uniqueness of the great lady's reception. Truth to tell, in her extreme good humour, the tragedian had admitted the humble visitor whilst engaged in the act of arranging her hair, at the moment of Fernande's entrance, her face, arms, and shoulders being clouded over by wondrously beautiful,

curly black locks. Such hair we witness seldom more than once in a life-time; and the dark, lustrous, rippling, waving masses that reached to the knees seemed as if they must be burdensome to the possessor. Some minutes, indeed, elapsed ere the delicate fingers, holding an ivory handled brush, succeeded in dividing the black cloud straight over the brow. Then the lady rested from her labours, and, turning a massive face, beaming with good humour and almost childlike naïveté, towards the intruder, inquired her errand without a word.

Thus encouraged, Fernande moved a step forward and laid her manuscript on the table.

"Ah," said the tragedian, smiling, "you too are a would-be poet, and covetous of fame. Poor child! Leave such disillusions to men. Women have enough of another kind."

It requires little perspicacity in France to discern the woman who works and who struggles. The black dress is the livery of labour as of sorrow among the middle classes, and Fernande's face, with its eager look and sensitive lines, might well have belonged to struggling genius. A prouder flush than that of self-esteem, however, mounted to her cheeks as she made answer.

"It is not of myself I am come to speak, Madame, but of my husband. There is something in his poetry, I am sure; but he has never yet succeeded with the publishers. And a year ago he lost his professorship at the Lycée because he took part in a political demonstration, and since then he has been able to obtain no employment whatever. Such misfortunes embitter him—we are very unhappy—"

"And you want me to read his verses and so bring

the critics to his feet?" said the lady, archly, yet with evident disconcertment. "Ah! now that you have come to plead for your husband, I know how hard it will be to send you away. But, my child, you must remember the poet is one person, the critics are Legion, and, if all the world reject him, he must accept the verdict."

The manuscript lying on the table had already told its story to those experienced eyes but too well.

"Oh!" Fernande urged, almost choking with eagerness, "it is as you say. But do, please, glance at the poem. It is a legend of this town. It is full of noble sentiments; and there are descriptions which would please people who know the place."

"You are a capital advocate," rejoined the tragedian, kindly, yet a little carelessly; she was so accustomed to such appeals. "And I will, at least, promise you one thing. I will run through the manuscript; and if, indeed, my judgment goes with my sympathies, your dearest wishes shall be fulfilled."

She smiled on the eager young face, already lined with care, and could not resist adding,

"If, as you say, the poem has a strong local interest, who knows but that I may, indeed, be the means of making its author's reputation."

"Oh! you are kinder than the angels," Fernande said, bending down to kiss the beautiful white hand, still holding the ivory-handled brush. "I shall have happy dreams to-night."

The lady leaned forward, and taking two little blue cards from a silk bag on the table, pushed them towards her.

"Anyhow, you shall have the gratification of hear-

ing me. Accept these tickets for the recital; and now leave me to finish my toilet, for I am expecting many visitors."

Fernande poured out her thanks as best she could, then, casting a last fond look at the manuscript, hurried away, hardly knowing whether to hope in the realisation of her dreams or no. Unversed in the ways of the world, she knew not how far she might rely on such readiness to oblige, or how much she must fear the critic. She reproached herself for not having tried to produce a deeper impression, so hard is it for us to feel that we have done enough, when our efforts are made on behalf of another!

CHAPTER II.

FERNANDE determined to keep her own counsel, and the subject of the coming recital was not even mooted till next day. As the pair sat over their silent breakfast—odd it is how sorrow silences, how joy makes garrulous!—she looked up at the dark-browed face opposite to her own, and said,

"Etienne, you will go with me to hear Madame Lorenzi to-night? I have had tickets given me."

Without raising his eyes from his plate, the young professor replied—that one short speech giving a clue to the character of the man—

"Yes; we must have gone had no tickets been sent. All the professors and scholars of the Lycée are to be there, I hear. If I stayed away, people would say, either that I was ashamed of myself, or that we had not two francs in the world for the

purchase of the tickets." He laughed with excessive cynicism. "It is a pleasant world," he added. "Suppose we make up our minds to bid adieu to it altogether."

"Oh! do not be so bitter—so reckless," the young wife said, imploringly. "Heaven has not forsaken us, I am sure. We shall yet see better days."

By way of reply he merely shrugged his shoulders. Fernande, watching him, mused sadly on the transforming power of care. Sarcastic her husband had ever been, and very proud; but no one kinder, more genial so long as he had been prosperous.

It pained her too, inexpressibly, that her own affection seemed hardly to console him now. Whilst the slightest sign of his love for her could have lightened the darkest hour, he appeared to sink back into himself, and to regard even love as a mockery in being so forlorn and unhappy.

Never had a larger or more varied audience been gathered together in the spacious theatre than that assembled to-night to welcome the great *artiste*. It was an occasion of enjoyment alike for the grave as well as the frivolous-minded, the young as well as the old, the cultured as well as the uninstructed. What French-born man, woman or child but can enjoy a scene from Racine, a song of Béranger, an idyl of Lamartine, a fable of La Fontaine, when delivered with the power, sweetness, and pathos of a Lorenzi. Such things are familiar to all, and thrill a French audience with generous enthusiasm.

No sooner, therefore, had this magnificent creature begun the rehearsal with Victor Hugo's superb "Cain," than the whole vast audience was attuned for the rest;

and—so subtle is the power of elocution!—that rich, musical, many-toned voice soon lifted even the sad heart of Fernande into airier regions. As she listened with bated breath to the passionate utterances of Athalie, she forgot the hopes that had buoyed her up throughout the day; she heard, not in suspense, but in a frame of mind with which personal feeling had nothing to do, this great, living world of poetry and eloquence absorbing her own troubled world, so poor, so puny at best!

And Etienne soon forgot his crushed ambitions, his deep-seated bitterness, as he glowed under those rapid impressions. Fernande, glancing at his eager face, and suddenly recalled to her fond foolish hopes, as, indeed, they already seemed, consoled herself with the thought that, anyhow, they would return home the richer for such an experience. Madame Lorenzi would bring them neither fame nor fortune, but she would bestow a beauteous memory none could take away.

For all Fernande's soaring hopes vanished under the excitement of this incomparable evening. As one magnificent poem after another was delivered, now with the tenderest grace, now with the finest passion, every phrase and word even gaining greater beauty and deeper meaning, she felt herself growing happier and humbler. No; it was mere self-deception and audacity to hope that her husband could as yet be enrolled among the goodly company of the poets. He must make greater effort, he must abide his time.

Thus the enchanted moments glided by, and at last, when the tragedian did indeed announce a selection from living Breton poets, Fernande waited, cold

and listless. She hoped no more in the realisation of her project, and she would fain have had the evening over, since nothing now awaited her but disillusion, disappointment she had no right to call it.

They must wake up to-morrow to the work-a-day world as if nothing had happened, and must brace themselves to endure what further trial Heaven should see fit to inflict. It was not at all in the nature of things that evil fortunes should be changed in a day! The clouds must break by degrees, and the sun would doubtless shine out in time, but not now and not suddenly, as by magic.

So she sat, with cold eyes and folded hands, no longer deceiving herself, only amazed at the wild ambitions of an hour or two ago.

Was she dreaming? Did she really hear, or was it but in imagination, her husband's name? She leaned forward now desperately eager, she watched the tragedian as if her very existence depended on the next words she should utter, and when they came, when in unmistakably clear and emphatic tones her husband's name was again pronounced, it was with the greatest difficulty she could maintain self-composure. She dared not even so much as glance at the rigid figure by her side, but the short sigh, the quickly drawn-in breath, denoted an agitation stronger than her own. There are moments in life when, in truth, "*la joie fait peur*," and this was one.

The young professor had turned ashy pale on realising the truth. For, of course, his poor despised verses were not now dragged forth for criticism and cold, chilling analysis, but for praise and warm applause only. He, in his turn, was to make this en-

thusiastic audience thrill with poetic fervour, and to appear before his fellow-townsmen in the ineffable light of the teacher, the poet! Such a triumph might well have guerdoned one doubly gifted and doubly unhappy. With the swift unerring discernment of the true critic, the artiste had culled from the somewhat ponderous manuscript just the one piece of description suited to the audience and the occasion. It was a charming little piece of word-painting, in which the features of this fine old French city on a summer moonlight night were faithfully yet poetically delineated by one who knew them well—the sombre cathedral, the bastioned château, the broad flowing Loire, the crowded harbour, the wooded islets. Such a picture could but touch listeners familiarised with it from early childhood; whilst running through the whole passage was a vein of deep, almost passionate sadness and ardent patriotism. The verses, moreover, told a story, a story of aspiration, of disappointment, of a life unsatisfied with common things. And, as a specimen of a young poet feeling his wings, it might well have received the suffrages of a much more critical audience, especially when rendered in accents so faultless, with elocution so exquisite! The audience, no less generous in France than elsewhere on such occasions, readily seized on the opportunity of praising an unfortunate man. Almost everyone present knew the young professor's story, one reason the more for extraordinary applause and cries, of "The author! the author!"

There was no drawing back. Pale, trembling in every limb, looking more like a culprit at the bar than a hero in the moment of his triumph, Etienne

now rose, and, trying to smile, bowed to the right and to the left.

Never had the pair lived through so intense a moment, and when it was over, unable any longer to endure such unwonted strain, they quietly rose, and, quitting the theatre, hurried home in silence and happy tears!

CHAPTER III.

“OH!” were Etienne’s first words on entering the house, “what a galling thing is such poverty as ours! To-morrow, when I go to throw myself at the feet of my benefactress, I shall be the only one of her poets present unable to offer even a flower!”

“She will want no thanks,” Fernande said, recalling the careless good nature with which she had been received, “nor flowers either”—she was about to say, unthinkingly—her table was covered with them; checking herself in time, she added instead—“But, though we can do nothing for her, who knows what she may not be able to do for us?”

“Who knows, indeed!” Etienne cried. “She may introduce me to the publishers of Paris, and I may at once obtain some literary employment. Anyhow, what has happened to-night can but have good effect. I am no longer a poor creature in the eyes of my town-folk!”

“How the people clapped! Ah! I am too happy!” Fernande said, as indeed she was. Tears of joy again came to her relief, and when she retired to rest, it was to dream, but not to sleep. Nor did sleep visit

Etienne's eyes that night, though what a difference between the thoughts of husband and wife as each tossed on a restless pillow!

Fernande saw in this blissful occurrence a prospect of bettered worldly condition, of immediate fortune, of burdensome debts paid, of a well-stored larder, of certain domestic comforts so long denied them. The recognition of her husband's poetic faculty afforded a deeper satisfaction than any such thoughts as these, but she was a housewife, and her housewifely instincts had been sorely tried by the poverty of the last twelve months. She could not help dwelling most on the material results of this piece of unexpected good fortune. Imagination even soared so far as to picture a pet canary in the parlour window, a stand of flowers, a pair of new curtains to replace the faded red moreen that had been such an eyesore for months past.

Etienne, on the other hand, indulged in equally extravagant dreams of a different kind. The publishing world of Paris would find him out. The prestige accorded to his poem by Madame Lorenzi's reading, would lead to fame and fortune; perhaps in time to a high position in the Parisian world of letters. He should make the acquaintance of those congenial to him; he should be able to buy books, to travel a little, and, above all, he should write something that would win him universal recognition.

Thus feverishly the night passed to both; and, when morning broke, Etienne could hardly wait till the proper hour came for paying his respects to the great lady. Fernande watched him set off with a face from which care had almost fled, so wonderfully rapid

is the healing of joy! Her husband had kissed her fondly at parting, had been his old self over their frugal breakfast. Yes, there was no doubt of it, their long probation had come to an end: better days were in store for them.

Little more than an hour passed when the young professor returned, light-footed, as if treading on air. Never had she seen him so animated, so gay. From his face, too, had vanished, as if by magic, the lines of care.

"Think of it," he cried, eagerly. "Madame Lorenzi gives a dinner to-night at her hotel, to which all the literary men of the place are invited, I amongst them! Oh! the nobility of that woman! She will prove our good star, Fernande."

"I have never been to a dinner party in my life," Fernande said, simply. "It will be more of an event to me than to anyone."

"My dear child," Etienne replied, with just a touch of implied reproach, "ladies are not invited, you no more than the rest. Madame Lorenzi's banquet is given to the poets, from whose works she read last night, and after the dinner she will play the critic to each."

Fernande was silent. She saw the reasonableness of her exclusion, but felt disconcerted by it nevertheless. For a few moments only, however. She was too happy just then to dwell on anything in the shape of a mere personal disappointment. And, after all, she reasoned to herself, it is he who is the poet, not I. From what motive but benevolence should I be invited to such a reunion? So she saw Etienne again set off with the same unclouded face, and, when at a late

hour he had not returned, went to bed full of blissful dreams. Madame Lorenzi's marked favour must indicate a wish to serve them. She soon fell into the deep unbroken sleep of youth and hope.

Next morning came another piece of hopeful intelligence, followed also, alas! by a check.

"Madame Lorenzi is determined to be my friend," were Etienne's first words. "To-day I am to breakfast with her, *tête-à-tête*, to talk over my prospects, and in the afternoon she is going to present me to the president of the Academy of Arts—a man who, if he liked, could give me a post to-morrow. And, think of it, Fernande! one bookseller here, Pierre, on the Quays, has already made advances to me about my poem. But I will publish in Paris, or nowhere. A provincial *début* stamps a book with inferiority at once."

"Tell me all about the banquet," Fernande said, trying not to show the embarrassment she could but feel at the notion of that *tête-à-tête* breakfast. "Was the conversation witty? Did Madame Lorenzi talk magnificently?"

"Ah! Fernande, there is no woman like her," cried the young professor, carried away by a really grateful enthusiasm. "To listen to her is to be inspired as by the sound of trumpets. No; she did not talk magnificently. She recited to us instead; first from the works of one, then from another. I was not left out. We were all weeping and smiling by turns at our own compositions."

"That must have been droll," Fernande said, laughing merrily.

"I must tell you the rest another time," he added, producing his pocket-book. "I have a dozen com-

missions to perform for Madame Lorenzi. She has set us all to work—André, my old schoolfellow, whose poem was published a year ago; Bertrand, who is assistant editor of the Republican paper here; and Roget, the great *littérateur* from Paris, who only condescends to visit his old friends and his native place from time to time. We are all, of course, only too proud and happy to be of use to her; and I think she could employ a dozen more. You see, she is making the tour of the provinces, and everything has to be arranged.”

“I hope, indeed, some good may come of it all to ourselves,” poor Fernande said, beginning to feel doubtful, and obliged to feel egotistical.

“Is not good already come of it?” Etienne retorted. “It is a mine of wealth to a young author even to be recognised by such a critic. But, now, I must not linger another moment.”

He hastened away, leaving Fernande to a long, long day of solitude and hopes; not, however, unalloyed as those of the day before had been.

CHAPTER IV.

FERNANDE’S jealous thoughts might have been allayed had she known that the tragedian numbered as many volunteers in her service of one sex as of the other. Ever ready to lavish bounties, she was equally ready to receive, and her arrival in any place was the signal for an outburst of enthusiastic rivalry among her admirers. She could not bestow favours on all, but she could receive them; in other words, find

everyone something to do, and the humblest behest was accepted as a privilege. Thus the great lady needed neither hired secretary, errand boy, nor even maid. A dozen literary aspirants were ready to undertake the first-named duties, whilst obscure adorers of her own sex offered their services in the capacity of waiting-women. Never, indeed, was a queen of tragedy more royally served, and never at so little cost. A smile, a pretty speech, a hand-clasp, seemed more than reward enough; though Madame Lorenzi was often enabled to confer more substantial benefits. What famous personage is not? Fernande remained wholly outside the animated, excited circle of which Madame Lorenzi formed the central figure. The tragedian had expressed no wish to make her acquaintance. Heaven help her! she had a dozen wistful-eyed poets' wives on her hands already. To poor Fernande, therefore, the only result of Etienne's triumph so far was a daily increasing solitude for herself.

"More commissions! more invitations?" she asked on the fourth morning when Etienne descended as usual, dressed with great care, and evidently about to spend the day after the usual manner.

"My dear Fernande," he replied, in a hurt tone, "you surely do not grudge any amount of time I bestow on that lady!"

"Oh, no; but—has anything more been done about the poem?" she asked, anxious that the main point should be kept in view, "and is there any chance of employment for you?"

"Yes, there is a chance——"

He looked at her penetratingly, and added, with evident reluctance,

"I ought to go to Paris for a short time. That is my best chance. Would you object?"

Tears started to Fernande's eyes, for she took in the full meaning of the words at once. He could bear—nay, could even entertain—the notion of going to Paris and leaving her behind alone.

"We must talk it over this evening," he said, hastily. "You will see how many things are in my favour if I could make use of Madame Lorenzi's introductions at once. And she will be returning to Paris, too. On account of the wintry weather she feels inclined to give up her provincial tour. She is ready to further my wishes to the utmost of her power."

Fernande listened and let him go without a word. Nor when he returned to the subject that same evening had she a word to say on her own behalf either. It seemed, indeed, as if all argument that did not come straight from his own heart would be useless. So she listened sadly and wonderingly, asking herself of what nature might this fascination be which so blinded her husband to his duty?

And the lady herself? Could that grand creature, with her almost infantine good-nature and winning smiles, have any notion of the harm she was doing? Etienne had been ever inclined to bitterness and discontent, but hitherto only the clouds of poverty had darkened their married life. Both portionless, both obscure, they had chosen each other from personal liking, and hitherto only needed a modest share of well-being to be quite happy. Oh! it was hard, thought Fernande, that the trap she had laid for good fortune should have proved a snare for evil! When timidly confronting the great lady with her husband's

manuscript under her shawl, how little had she foreseen any such possibility—a growing distrust on her side, a growing estrangement on his; no chance, so it seemed, at least, in these first moments of dismay, of things ever being quite smooth between them again!

And when next morning broke, the last of the old year, and Etienne, as usual, prepared for a long day's campaign in Madame Lorenzi's service, Fernande could no longer keep back her jealous thoughts. Pale, hollow-eyed from tears and sleeplessness, she said, as she poured out his early cup of coffee,

"To-morrow is the first day of the year, Etienne. You will at least keep that for me, will you not? We have no money for presents, but we will pay visits, as usual."

Etienne swallowed his coffee and replied, feigning not to see her wistful looks, nor to hear the tremulous misgiving in her voice.

"Let us settle our affairs first, and pay our New Year's visits afterwards, my child. You are ambitious for me, Fernande, you wish me to make my way as an author; you cannot really object to this proposed journey to Paris. What if I am a few weeks away, so long as I bring back Fortunatus' purse in my pocket?

This little speech, however well intentioned, had an inexpressibly harsh sound in Fernande's ears. A moment before she had been ready to throw herself on his breast and there weep out all her fears and apprehensions. Now she felt hopelessly silenced and chilled. A something, she knew not what, in his voice, a touch of lightness approaching to flippancy, seemed to separate her farther from him than ever. And when,

after a cold kiss and a hasty word of adieu, he went away, it was a positive relief to her to be alone. Yet, as the hours wore on, the loneliness grew more and more insupportable. She had no heart for housewifely duties, she could not occupy herself with the little purse she had been knitting for Etienne's New Year's gift—what a mockery would be such a gift now!—so at last she put on her bonnet and shawl and went out.

There had been a storm of rain and sleet; but the sun now shone brightly, and the streets presented the gayest appearance. Everyone was abroad, for the purpose of seeing the New Year's displays in the shop-windows and making purchases for the morrow. Fernande felt more than ever forlorn as she at last reached the busy quays and sat down in the planted walk between the streets, the railway, and the river.

As she sat thus on the very bench she had occupied a few days before, when that fateful missive had fluttered towards her, a carriage drove by in which sat Madame Lorenzi and her husband. Now, there was nothing at all extraordinary in such an occurrence. The great lady, having no lacquey, never drove out without some devoted servitor of either sex to fulfil her behests. It was not in accordance with the fitness of things that she should trail her velvet skirts through the mud for the purpose of buying a newspaper or a box of bonbons. Some one must rid her of such trouble, and thrice proud and happy was the privileged person.

To-day it had fallen to Etienne's turn, and no wonder that his face glowed with pleasure as he listened to his companion's sparkling talk. Was it to

be wondered at also that, for the time being, he should forget Fernande's anxious looks and all the grinding care he had left at home?

But the unhappy young wife interpreted his animation to mean much more than the fascination of an hour, the distraction of a day.

With a set face and a heart from which hope had died away, Fernande rose, but not to take the road leading home. Drawing down her veil, she walked rapidly in a wholly different direction.

CHAPTER V.

THAT night a solemn ceremonial linked with genial social observances took place in every church throughout the town—indeed, throughout the country. It was the so-called *veillée* or midnight mass commemorative of the last day of the year, which in France is ever followed by friendly little collations, simple or costly according to the circumstances of the host.

Since their marriage Etienne and Fernande had always brought home half a dozen friends from church, and spread a modest banquet in their honour. But this year even such an indulgence could not be thought of, and, as they had received no invitations either, Fernande resigned herself to the enjoyment of the music alone. On these occasions the finest compositions of the great masters are given with orchestral and voice accompaniments; and especially the chapels attached to the conventual institutions vie with each other in the musical treat offered their congregations.

There was one in particular to which lovers of

music resorted, sure there of listening to well-trained voices and faultless orchestration. This was the Chapel of the Visitation, an order recruited from ladies of noble family, who take perpetual vows and devote themselves ever after to prayer and meditation. Their black-robed, statuesque figures are seen behind an iron screen of the chapel, and weird is the effect on occasion of any jubilee like the present, when the rest of the building is brilliantly lighted, adorned with flowers, garlands, and banners, and crowded with holiday-makers in gala dresses.

Long before midnight every part of the elegant little building was densely thronged. An unusually disagreeable night had been braved for the sake of the most imposing celebration of the year. And it must be admitted that the after sociabilities, the anticipated chat, the champagne had enticed out not a few. There were two present, however, into whose troubled minds, hardly religious fervour, much less intellectual or worldly enjoyment, could enter just then. After a long, animated day spent in the tragedian's company, and also in unsparing devotion to her service, Etienne had been thus dismissed.

"It is New Year's Eve," the great lady said, kindly but carelessly. "Your wife will need your escort to mass, and I am engaged out to dinner and a *veillée*. To-morrow, why should you not bring her to see me? We can then enter more fully into your plans?"

Etienne stammered forth unready thanks, foreseeing too well that such favours had come too late.

He hurried home, however, in a cheerful frame of mind, determined to argue the matter of his projected visit to Paris more at length with her, and, if possible,

reason her out of these jealous fears. If, indeed, just now she could no longer find in her husband the Etienne of old, still less could he feel as if this were the Fernande he once knew, a Fernande who had once been ever fond, ever confiding, ever trustful.

What was his surprise to find their little rooms dark, cold, and deserted, and Fernande's bonnet and shawl no longer in their accustomed place. The lateness of the hour, the unusualness of such absence on her part, the bitterness with which they had parted that morning, all pointed to one conclusion. She had left him. She had fled!

"Fernande! Fernande!"

Again and again he called her name, feeling that the cry was vain, yet unable to keep silence. Then he sat down like one dazed, all kinds of desperate possibilities crowding on his brain.

Might Fernande's disappearance mean something too terrible to shape into words? Had the estrangement of the last day or two induced her to quit her home in a state bordering on despair?

He rose at last and searched hither and thither, hoping to find a little note for him, and by chance his eye lighted upon a velvet bag that used to contain her prayer-book. The missal was gone; and that fact, insignificant though it was, allayed his worst fears. Fernande was a regular attendant at the Chapel of the Visitation, and numbered some of the sisters among her friends. She might, after all, have only absented herself for the midnight mass.

But his mind was not easy, and a playful speech made in the first days of their marriage now recurred to his memory.

"Ah!" Fernande had said, with the happy confidingness of a young bride, "if you are ever unkind to me, I shall take refuge with the good nuns."

Whereupon he had laughingly rejoined, "On your peril! I shall send then two gendarmes to fetch you, in accordance with the laws of the land!"

These jests came back with cruel irony as he now set out for the Chapel of the Visitation, feeling almost sure that he should find Fernande there. He was among the first to arrive, but, though as yet the body of the building was almost empty, the nuns had already assembled in the screened-off place assigned to them. And there between two of the black-draped figures, looking in her dark dress and long veil hardly less sombre, knelt Fernande!

He realised the truth in a moment. She had carried out the sportive threat alluded to in happier days. She had quitted her husband and her home, if it might be so, for ever!

Meantime the aisles filled, the moments wore on, and soon the rich, full strains of the organ pealed forth an opening voluntary, followed by the majestic music of Spohr. On none present did the sounds fall with more moving effect than on the husband and wife, separated in the fact by a few yards only; but, in the spirit, by what a widening breach of misconception and outraged feeling!

Fernande's heart was already yearning to him, and every phase of the music seemed to plead in favour of love, pity, and forgiveness. The solemnity of the occasion pleaded also. They were standing on the threshold of the new year. Now, above all others, was the moment to make peace with the world; and, if

with the world, how much more so with one's best Beloved? Warring against such impulses as these were the remembered disenchantment and pain of the last few days—Etienne's growing coldness, his infatuation for the great lady from Paris, his determination to go there.

"Oh, no!" reasoned Fernande, thinking of the animated pair who had driven past her as she sat on the quays neglected and alone; "no, things can never be with us as before, never. Let Etienne go to Paris and win fame and fortune. I am too humble to aid him. I will end my days with the sisters in peace."

And long after the church had emptied and the crowds dispersed, Etienne waited outside hoping that Fernande would come! He also had been deeply moved by the music and the solemnity of the occasion; but he also, like Fernande, dwelling rather on his own grievances than on those he had caused another. She was blind, she was reckless, she refused to see that he only wanted to do the best thing for them both; he said, that he had her happiness and welfare at heart as well as the fulfilment of his dearest wishes.

In sorrow and extreme bitterness he returned at last, now blaming himself, now Fernande, and evil fortune most of all. What happy chance might unravel this hopeless complication? Like Fernande, he felt as if things could never be righted between them any more.

CHAPTER VI.

THE comic is ever interwoven with the tragic in human affairs, and the events of the next day were striking contrasted with those just narrated. Tragedy, moreover, is especially out of place on New Year's day in France, the greatest holiday of the calendar, the festival alike of rich and poor, the resting day of many who seldom quit their posts at any other time. From early morning till far into the night the streets present an animated appearance, and feasting, conviviality, and fine clothes are the order of the hour. Among the celebrations which lend *éclat* to the occasion in large French cities is the official reception held at the Prefecture. The civil and military authorities, the consuls, the representatives of foreign powers, the principal residents then present themselves in full dress, with a display of equipages not witnessed at any other time.

Seldom had a more brilliant reception been known in this fine old French city than on the New Year's day with which we have to do. From mid-day till late in the afternoon a stream of carriages poured into the courtyard of the Prefecture from all parts, large crowds having collected to watch the pageant, as indeed it might be called.

The reception was fairly over when a lady drove up, who, but for her thick veil and wraps, would most surely have elicited respectful salutations from the crowd. It was the famous Madame Lorenzi, the owner of one of the richest voices and memories in all Europe. Were the *chefs-d'œuvre* of French lyrical and

dramatic poetry destroyed, this lady's memory could resuscitate them, so, at least, her admirers said.

To-day, however, it was evident that Madame Lorenzi's mind was not occupied with poetry, but with the every-day occurrences of life. Her fine brow, no longer contemplative, was knit in impatience and perplexity, her almost infantine smile of good-nature was gone. She looked disturbed, harassed, and, it must be admitted, out of temper. No sooner did she find herself alone in the presence of the Préfet than she plunged at once into the very heart of her subject.

"Monsieur le Préfet," she said, holding out both hands to him—they were acquaintances of some years standing, "you have ever been a kind friend to me. Come to my aid now. I am in the direst extremity. I am lost—I am undone."

"I hope not," replied the Préfet, drily.

He admired tragedy in its proper place as well as anyone; but he was not given to strong expressions of feeling himself or to admire them in others.

"Ah! you do not know all or you would not speak so phlegmatically," added Madame Lorenzi, piteously. "Listen, then, to the entire catalogue of my misfortunes."

"Would madame permit an old friend to indulge in a cigar after an unusually hard day?" asked the Préfet, in the same tones.

"Pray smoke; pray do what you please, only hear me," cried the tragedian, wringing her exquisite little hands in despair. "You know me, Monsieur le Préfet. You know that when I come into a place like this and take up all the young poets by the hand, it is simply from a desire to be of use to them. You will

uphold me so far, I feel sure, against the calumnies of the world."

The Préfet lifted the tiny cigarette from his mouth, and, being really much exhausted by the polite speeches exacted of him during the last few hours, merely bowed blandly for reply.

The lady went on:—

"Think of it! Instead of proving a benefactress to these young geniuses, I have turned out to be their bane—their bitterest foe! One and all, I have driven them to desperation!"

"What kind of desperation, my dear madame?" asked her host, curtly, but blandly.

"Every imaginable kind, every imaginable degree, Monsieur le Préfet. There is the young professor, Etienne Kaloque, who lost his place some time since. I had hoped to help him. He has real talent. And all that I have done is to bring about a misunderstanding between him and his wife. She has misinterpreted my kindnesses. She has left him. In fact, she has run away."

"She will in all probability run back again," said the Préfet, coolly.

The tragedian shook her head.

"Worse things are to come. You know those two clever young fellows, St. Pierre and Bertrand, both journalists, both natives of this town, and, till my coming, the best of friends. I am the innocent cause of a desperate quarrel between them. They have gone to some out-of-the-way place to fight a duel."

"They will most likely do each other no injury worth mentioning," replied the impassible Préfet.

"Hear me to the end, if indeed there is any end

to this wretchedness," the lady went on, too much absorbed in her own anxieties to realise her host's frame of mind.

"There is a fourth young poet of greater promise than all—Bernard—you will remember an idyl I read of his at my *séance*—I am deeply interested in his future—but alas! for the vanity of poets! His head is quite turned! He is engaged to a sweet girl, he falls at my feet in desperation, and declares that he loves her no longer. No sooner is he gone than the girl flies to me, accusing me of stealing her lover's heart. Threatening to go into a convent, to end her wretched existence with the fumes of a charcoal pan—I know not what! and hardly is she fairly out of the house when the parents of both besiege me, begging me to reason the young lover into his senses, to bid him throw his verses into the fire, and, in fact, to tell him that he is an idiot."

"Which would most likely be a near approximation to the truth," was the reply.

"No—I cannot so disenchant him. He has talent, and it is only right that it should be encouraged. With his domestic affairs the critic has nothing to do," Madame Lorenzi said. Then taking out her watch, she added, distractedly, "Monsieur le Préfet, time flies, and I must leave you to imagine the rest of my grievances."

The Préfet looked up beamingly. He was really much fagged, and, charming as was Madame Lorenzi's society under any other circumstances, just now he sadly needed a little repose.

"I must leave you," added the lady, rising. Then

she added, in a whisper, "I leave your city this very afternoon. I am driving straight to the station."

"Perhaps, all things considered, a wise resolve," replied the sententious Préfet.

"It is the only thing to be done. I fly, therefore, from adorers and detractors, but I breathe no syllable of my intentions to any ears less discreet than your own." The Préfet bowed, and she continued, "I steal away like a thief in the night, and I ask you to aid my escape. To return to the hotel, to remove my trunks, would hopelessly frustrate my intention. I should have all these desperate people at my heels. What I want you to do is this—an hour or two after I am fairly off, to send a servant to the master of the hotel with this packet, containing my keys and instructions."

The Préfet took the keys from the little white fingers, trembling with eagerness, and promised to fulfil the behest.

"And whither does Madame Lorenzi bend her steps?" he asked, with a smile.

"No one is to know. I only know myself that I am going somewhere!" she replied. "Adieu, Monsieur le Préfet; try to get my *protégé* Etienne Kaloque that post. He would fill it admirably."

They confabulated earnestly a few minutes, then the lady took her leave. Half an hour later, she was gliding in the railway carriage right through the heart of the town. The railway is not here conveniently constructed for the flight of runaways, whether from foes, creditors, or adorers. But Madame Lorenzi, leaning back on her cushions, could safely indulge in curious glances to the right and to the left. Among the passers-by might be the troubled Etienne, the dis-

tracted maiden, the recalcitrant lover, the estranged friends. The thick veil protected her, much more so the fact that no one in the least suspected her intention.

So the train slowly wended its way by boulevards and quays, from the old city on the Loire, and that afternoon the anxious suppliants besieging the great lady's doors awaited her return in vain. When the truth came out, as usually happens under such circumstances, people made the best of a calamity they could not help, and things righted themselves by degrees.

The golden visions of fame and fortune that had dazzled so many minds faded one by one, so also the bitter estrangements brought about by the illustrious visitor.

When Etienne entered Fernande's deserted little parlour late on New Year's day, he found already some modest gifts that had been slipped through the window, as the custom is in France when there is no servant to open the door. The eyes of the young man fell listlessly on the packets of bonbons tied up with coloured ribbons, offerings of friends hardly richer than themselves. Some one had sent a lovely cyclamen in flower, which seemed to beautify the room, but that did not gladden Etienne's eyes either. He was thinking of Fernande and contrasting this New Year with the last. In spite of care and anxiety, how much better it had been than this, for no cloud as yet dimmed their affection, and in small trials as well as great they could comfort each other. The solemnity of the occasion, the consciousness of a new life that ever comes with the opening of another year, touched him, and made him feel tender, even remorseful. He

blamed Fernande for leaving her home, but he also blamed himself now as the cause of her going. After all, how little could this great lady from Paris ever be to him! How less than nothing he was to her! But Fernande was his wife, and he knew that to her he was all in all.

Thinking these sad thoughts, on a sudden the window was opened by the postman, who instantaneously and without a word, as his habit was, dropped some letters on to the sill. One larger, more imposing than the rest, and having a richly emblazoned crest, caught Etienne's attention at once. Taking it up, he saw that the handwriting was that of the tragedian, and that it was addressed to his wife. He broke the seal—they had never any epistolary secrets from each other—and, hardly believing the evidence of his senses, read the following: "From Madame Lorenzi to the wife of Etienne Kaloque. A New Year's offering." These words were written in pencil, and below was an official statement to the effect that the Maire and the municipal council of the city, having well considered Madame Lorenzi's recommendation of the young poet, Monsieur Etienne Kaloque, to the now vacant post of town librarian, begged to declare that he was nominated, and would be requested to enter on his duties at once.

Now this letter certainly did not bring fame or fortune, nor did it bring the realisation of Etienne's fondest dreams. But it brought the recognition of his fellow-townsmen, an assured income with an honourable calling, and leisure for literary pursuits—a thousand things better than fame, it seemed to Etienne, in the first transports of his thankfulness and joy. He

was no longer a pariah in society, no longer a beggar, and Fernande henceforth would have something like a home, indeed!

Need we say it? That day saw the husband and wife in happy reconciliation, figuratively, if not literally, at the feet of their benefactress. And the tragedian, who was good nature itself, yet playful even to maliciousness, could not forbear letting Etienne know the story of the manuscript, and that it was Fernande who had, after all, mended his fortunes!

PRIEST AND MAIDEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE time, September; the scene, a *table d'hôte* dinner in a much frequented French town. For the most part nothing can be more prosaic than these daily assemblies of English tourists bound for Switzerland and the south, and a slight sprinkling of foreigners, the two elements seldom or never blending; a visitant from another planet might, indeed, suppose that between English and French-speaking people lay such a gulf as divides the blond new Englander from the swarth African, so icy the distance, so unbroken the reserve. Nor is there anything like cordiality between the English themselves. Our imaginary visitant from Jupiter would here find matter for wonder also, and would ask himself the reason of this freezing reticence among the English fellowship. What deadly feud of blood, caste, or religion could thus keep them apart? Whilst the little knot of Gallic travellers at the farther end of the table straightway fall into friendliest talk, the long rows of Britons of both sexes and all ages speak only in subdued voices, and to the members of their own family.

Upon this particular occasion, however, the routine of the wearisome *table d'hôte* was broken by a little circumstance most probably unnoticed except by one observer, not descended from the planet Jupiter, certainly, but having no more to do with the two persons figuring in this little romance than if such had been the case.

Somewhat late in taking their places, both newcomers, both strangers to each other and the rest of the company, might now be seen, an English girl and a young French priest.

The girl told her own story to eyes not endowed with uncommon discernment. She was one of those sweet, modest flowers that bloom in parsonage gardens, daughter of a humble, country parson, artless, and unversed in the ways of the world, yet gently born and bred.

She was, perhaps, twenty-five, and what may best be described as an old-fashioned beauty, no low brow hidden by close curls here, no languishing eyes and massive chin according to the last current pattern of loveliness, no limp draperies or Greek statuesqueness were here; instead, a rustic, Quakerish picture of freshness, grace, and *naïveté*, pretty lines of face and form, joyous colouring in the sweet eyes, lips and hair, above all, if not piquancy, something akin to it, and a certain readiness and apt intelligence redeeming commonness or monotony. All the makings of a beauty were here, and, had she come into the world a princess or a duke's daughter, the world would have heard of her; as it was, she would most likely never be thought of as anything but ordinary by relations or neighbours; so true it is that, if a jest's prosperity lies

in the ear of the listener, so does the reputation of a beautiful face depend on the eyes that behold it.

It was evidently the first time that she had joined a foreign *table d'hôte*, and out of her clear eyes beamed a child's amazement at all the novel circumstances around her, and a shy yet self-contained relish of the scene. With fearless, modest glances she surveyed her fellow-travellers and immediate neighbours, trying to understand what was said in French, and quite ready to talk if only somebody would talk to her. It was hard to be condemned to silence amid so many excitements; so said the sweet face of the parsonage-bred English girl as she glanced at her neighbour, the priest.

It seemed to her unsophisticated mind the most natural thing in the world to enter into a conversation with this stranger, and for the simple reason that he was a priest. His calling appealed to her sense of fraternity and good fellowship. The pale, black-robed young abbé by her side recalled perhaps some high church brother or cousin, and had as much clerical savour about him as the portly English rector placed at the head of the table. He had, moreover, politely saluted her according to the custom of the country, and she felt bound to make herself agreeable for the time being just as if she were placed beside a strange curate at a country dinner-party.

Naïvely as a child, therefore, yet with almost the quiet dignity of a woman of the world, she now addressed him. It was a very common-place remark she made, uttered in school-girl's French and with the demureness of a nun. But the priest seemed utterly taken aback. He coloured, he glanced at her, his

black eyes scanned the purely outlined features and girlish form searchingly, then recovering himself he replied affably, and with a smile.

This was a beginning and the girl, being anxious to speak French and to talk to a French-speaking person, next said,

"I have never spoken French in my life, but I will try to talk a little. Can you understand me?" she asked, suddenly looking at him with charming playfulness.

Again the priest's dark eyes strayed from his companion to his plate with ill-concealed embarrassment.

"Every word. Pray go on," he replied, and, whilst she continued to get out little nothings with a blush and a smile, he pursued his study of the phenomenon before him.

Otherwise than a phenomenon it could not be; a young, untravelled, lovely English girl thus freely, almost confidingly, talking to himself, a stranger, above all, a priest. He had never in his whole life been so entirely perplexed, but the predicament could hardly be displeasing. The most finished coquette or world-renowned beauty could hardly have puzzled him so much. For what may a young priest know of women after this fair and angelically innocent Saxon type? Reared among his own sex, and now fresh from the seminary, even the typical Frenchwoman was strange to our young abbé. His boyhood had been without the society of sisters, much less girl playmates, and he was as yet too young and obscure a priest to have any experience of those consummately-dressed, insinuating, would-be-sentimental Frenchwomen of the world, who seek in the confessional the excitement

wanting to the last new novel. His first, almost painful, embarrassment over, he began to take a wholly unexpected and distracting pleasure in the adventure. Again and again his piercing black eyes gleamed at the dainty picture beside him, its very unusualness adding fresh charm. This girl, with her simple dress, soft bloom of health, fair hair, and natural, artless ways, was as unlike his countrywomen as could possibly be.

Little wonder that he gazed and gazed, every fresh sign of his companion's unsuspecting friendliness and interest arousing new wonder.

"And you are staying here quite alone?" he asked.

"Yes," was the prompt reply, "but it was not to have been so. A friend of my father's brought me as far as Paris, intending to accompany me to Geneva, but a telegram called her back, so I must finish my journey alone."

"But you have friends at Geneva."

"Yes. I am going to spend the winter with the family of a French pastor, for the sake of studying French and German, and at the same time I am to teach the children English. And whither are you going?"

"I have come from Savoy and I am on my way to a distant cure to which I have been appointed in the Cévennes."

She smiled at the new travelling experience she was gaining.

"One of the strangest things in foreign travel," she said, "seems to me the acquaintances we make we shall never meet again. This time to-morrow evening we shall be speeding away in different directions, and, of course, never see each other any more."

It was a childish reflection enough, but it seemed to set the priest a-thinking. The girl fancied he looked melancholy, and for a moment or two perused him curiously and sympathetically.

She hardly knew why this young, sallow-cheeked abbé interested her so much. Perhaps it was that she had already recognized his interest in herself, and the fact pleased her. She had never interested any man before that she was aware of, and, although she was too young, too naïve, and too happy as yet to feel neglected, the thought had sometimes come unwelcomely. Alas! fair as was this flower, she had grown up amid so many that all eyes passed her by! "The pathos of unsought women," was not yet written on that careless face; but so far neglected she had been. No man's voice had ever whispered in her ear of love and admiration. She scrutinized the stranger now with questioning eyes, and she read nothing in his face to abash or disconcert them. This excessive pallor and look of maceration indicated over much of spiritual exercise and ascetism in daily life. He was a priest of the Church of Rome, she the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, himself not wholly unpractised in fasting and mortifications of the flesh. Here was no mystery for her. She saw, or fancied she saw, in the young man's face signs of fearful spiritual conflicts, havoc of mental struggle to which she was personally a stranger. What doubts and phases of unbelief he might be going through even now, she shuddered to think of, and she contemplated his physiognomy with a look of almost sisterly tenderness and compassion. Such pallor and restlessness should surely mean inner warfare known to himself and God only.

Quite suddenly the young priest now looked up, encountering with no little astonishment that pure, questioning gaze. He might misinterpret it utterly, not to see it was impossible. The English girl then felt the same kind of inquisitiveness about him that he had been all the time conscious of feeling with regard to herself. The steadfast, enquiring look of the grey eyes could not be misread. He interested her.

Now a physiognomist, or rather a psychologist studying the pale, handsome face of the priest, must have noticed a marvellous change come over it as he became aware of the girl's look and its meaning. A light, that was almost like a lightning flash, for a moment irradiated his black, restless eyes, a smile played about the thin, reflective lips, a faint, hardly appreciable glow of colour came to his sallow cheeks. But all these changes were of the moment.

"You were looking at me just now," he began, with that matchless self-control as inseparable from the priest as the tonsure, "perhaps asking yourself if I were happy or not?"

He spoke with a smile, in which there was a suspicion of bitterness, but in frank, friendly tones that inspired confidence.

Thus interrogated, and now feeling no shyness, she replied, sadly and artlessly, as a child,

"You do not look happy."

Again he smiled, and, before replying, his dark, piercing eyes glanced round to assure himself that no one was listening. Then he said, not looking at her, and in low tones, yet each word audible, as if it had been shouted in tones of thunder.

"Were we alone, for five minutes only, it would

solace me to tell you why I am not happy. Here it is impossible."

She made no answer, but he could see that the speech had pleased yet troubled her. This sweet trembling on the verge of a man's confidences, no matter of what spiritual kind, was so new indeed to the guileless, parsonage-bred girl that she blushed crimson, and tears started to her eyes. The tears he could not see, but he saw the blush, loveliest rosy mantle imaginable, for a moment overspreading the soft cheek. And once more the man's face became a study. More than an impression could be read there; now it was emotion, as keen as it was novel, that disconcerted him.

"I understand; there are so many people here."

The stammering reply, with its delicious accompaniment, the blush, would doubtless have emboldened him to further confidences, but just then two or three guests rose from the table, dessert had been served, and the girl's sense of decorum prompted her to follow their example. Bowing to her dinner-table companion, and wishing him a happy journey, she rose and left the room. The young abbé was about the last to leave his place; but the wine remained untasted in his glass, and the fruit before him untouched.

With one hand supporting his cheek, the other holding his breviary, he sat looking upon the tablecloth in an attitude of deep thought. As he sat thus, his brow clouded over, his lips were knit together as if in pain, his whole attitude became that of a man despondent and self-questioning.

By-and-by the whole company dispersed, some to the salon, others to their rooms. The priest retired to

a remote corner of the former, and, as if to make up for past abstraction, now gave his whole attention to the neglected breviary.

Meantime, from her little bed-chamber on the third story, Mary Eden sat looking down on the brilliantly-lighted street below. But with what different feelings from those of an hour before!

She had gone to the *table d'hôte* full of a child's eagerness about the new, strange foreign world in which she was suddenly thrown. That she should make acquaintances seemed likely enough, but that she should be led to take the keenest interest in a stranger had never entered into her imagination. It was even more astonishing to her that she should awaken interest in him, and the priest's words came back again and again. "It would solace me to tell you why I am unhappy."

She pondered for a long time, and at last imagined that she had arrived at his meaning. He was unhappy because he could not reconcile himself with some especial doctrine of the Romish Church. He had doubts, waverings, which he felt burdensome and would fain confide in a friend. Oh! what would she not give to be able to listen to him and solace him? Perhaps he had no mother nor sister, not a friend in the world to whom he could freely open himself! And, meeting her thus unawares, he felt impelled to confide in her. It was wonderful. "Wonderful and sad," poor Mary thought, as she recalled all that had passed between them. "To-morrow evening by this time he will be hastening to Auvergne, I to Geneva. We shall never see each other again, never, never."

There were the morning hours of the next day,

but it did not occur to her that they should meet. She must order her coffee upstairs, and, if indeed should summon courage to venture out of doors, it would be for a quiet suburban walk, not for sight-seeing in the gay town.

And if they did meet, either in the bustling dining-room or abroad, of what use? They were bound to salute each other coldly, and pass on.

She lay down to rest sorrowfully, but not yet to sleep. Oh! if she could only be of supreme use to one human being in the world,—to this one—how happy it would make her. She was no coquette, no craver after the homage and following accorded to so many of her sex. She had never for a moment thought of herself as appearing to others anything but commonplace. A whispered word, a look, had altered this self appraisement.

The timid promptings of a simple yet reflective nature seemed at last warranted, for what woman has not said, touching her heart, "There is something here!—maybe not poetry, not passion, but something that must express itself—if life is to be life indeed!" The vicar's pure-eyed daughter was no weaver of love's dreams, but she could no more help dreaming than other mortals, and to help some one, to lead some one, to be the first, best, only friend of a soul in need, was all her longing.

CHAPTER II.

THE morning was enticing, and, as Mary Eden opened her casement, the animated French streets seemed to beckon her out of doors. There were out-

landish looking peasant folk bringing in fruit and vegetables to market, little bands of soldiers marching out to exercise, blue and black-robed nuns shuffling along, and many other spectacles as strange and novel to her untravelled gaze.

The whole day was before her to do as she would with, the city abounded in curious and beautiful things, she was conscious of an overweening inquisitiveness about them all, yet she did not stir. Was it because she dreaded an encounter with her acquaintance of the day before? Was it from a sense of mere forlornness? She hardly knew. She acknowledged to herself that she desired nothing so much as to see this unique French city—queen of the wine lands!—yet she felt spell-bound and unable to stir. The garrulous officiousness of the chambermaid came as a welcome break to lonely thoughts.

“Mademoiselle should not mope indoors all day because she is alone,” said the brisk, pleasant Frenchwoman. “All young English ladies walk about alone here. People are used to it,” she added, much as if the fact were in itself terrible and required qualification.

“It is the first time in my life that I have been from home,” Mary said.

“What matter? You may go where you will, no one will take any notice of you here. Young English ladies travelling alone are as plentiful as blackberries in these days. Mademoiselle should visit the churches, the museums, and the birthplace of St. Bernard.”

St. Bernard! The name had wonderful fascination for the parsonage-bred English girl, and she collected her wandering thoughts with no little self-reproach.

What would her parents and the children say if she told them nothing of this long day in a famous old French town? And St. Bernard was the favourite of all saint-hoods at home! How wonderful to see his birthplace, how delightful to describe it! Yes, she would put on her bonnet and cloak that very moment.

Her talkative companion now led her to a back-window on the staircase, and pointed to a little spire crowning the clustered village of a lovely green hill.

"That is the place," continued the woman. "It is a nice little walk of three quarters of an hour by the boulevard that you see. A blind man could not miss the way."

Just then came the exciting incident of a letter from home, and Mary devoured it as if a year instead of twenty-four hours divided her from the writers. It was one of those multiform epistles common in economical families, every member taking advantage of the stamp. The important part of the letter was a postscript in her father's handwriting.

"As we post this," wrote the parson, "a telegram comes from Mr. and Mrs. —— to say that they will pass through your present halting-place on their way to Geneva the day after to-morrow at noon. Wait therefore and join them. You cannot miss each other, as they have twenty minutes at the station for refreshments."

This piece of news turned the current of Mary's thoughts. She must at once sit down and answer the letter. She must tell the master of the hotel that her room would be wanted one night more. Plenty of time to see the village in which St. Bernard was born,

and many other things besides, now that she had the whole day before her!

Of course she wrote minutely, dwelling on every detail with the emphasis of a young traveller, and, when at last her task was done, the best morning hours had slipped away. The sun was high and burning hot, the luncheon hour would soon come, and she must do her sight-seeing in the afternoon.

As she timidly made her way to the bureau downstairs, in order to deliver her letter and message, she saw the young abbé standing in the doorway. His back being turned towards her, she felt sure of not being observed, and fulfilled her errand blushing but composedly, ordering a frugal luncheon, mentioning the change in her plans, finally asking the way to the birth-place of St. Bernard.

The clear, girlish tones in broken French reached the priest where he stood, and without turning round or moving a muscle, he hearkened, straining his ears so as not to lose a syllable. A marked change came over his face as he stood thus on the alert. One might almost have supposed that desperate issues depended on the accurate hearing of these few maidenly speeches, so knit the visual nerves, so keen the expression. The painful strain over, and the light steps of the speaker having vanished on the staircase, the priest in his turn approached the bureau.

"If letters come for me, my name is on your list," he said to the secretary. "And my movements are changed. I stay one night more."

"Very good, Monsieur l'Abbé," was the reply. "Letters shall be at once delivered to you."

The priest, having uttered one of those prolix

pieces of politeness deemed necessary in France, now turned away; crossing the threshold he directed his steps to the sombre cathedral close by that towered over the city.

What fate could proclaim itself in the accustomed utterances of a young girl? Yet, as the dark, slender figure of the abbé hastened away from the hotel and towards the cathedral, he looked like one hurrying from fate, fleeing from some dire destiny. And when he had passed out of the glare and bustle of the streets, to find himself alone in the twilight obscurity of the vast aisle, there was almost a look of fear in his white face.

The comfort of these wide, solitary refuges and solacing places can only be realised in Catholic countries. The priest might here have wept unobserved if tears were welling up in his bosom, or he might pour out his spirit in prayer, with no human listener by to sympathise or deride. He neither wept nor prayed, but made the circuit of the building, glancing at the confessional boxes as if moved to enter and therein cast off some horrid burden weighing on his soul. Not a single priest, however, happened to be on duty, and the young abbé, breathing a sigh—was it of despair or relief?—leaned upon a *prie-dieu* and gave himself up to thought. Thought self-questioning, agonised, intense. What dark secret lay hidden in the young man's breast? What vision could thus make his face dark and portentous? Did the concentrated expression of pain and conflict indicate spiritual stirrings only, those inner, unutterable struggles as come to us all?

For an hour the black-robed figure remained thus,

motionless as the marble statues in their niches close by. Then, as if he had suddenly solved the problem on which his mind had been bent, he hastily quitted the cathedral.

CHAPTER III.

MARY EDEN now sallied forth, pleased to find that no one looked at her. The road was not to be missed, a straight suburban road, bordered with villas, from which a narrower way curved upwards to the church on the hill. The beauty and freshness of the landscape exhilarated the girl, and filled her with innocent, happy thoughts.

When she had passed the gates of the octroi, the scene was no longer suburban, but pastoral and poetic. A lovelier prospect, indeed, it were hard to find anywhere.

The broad plain, threaded by many a road, was lustrous with the vines, every waxen leaf warmed into gold by the mellow sunshine, whilst beyond and around, ripest colour and densest shadow, rose the purple hills.

Little villages smiled amid the vines and on the hill-tops, whilst beautiful as these surroundings lay the fair city, its tall spires and historic tower rising majestically above the modern town clustered round about.

Blue-bloused peasants were working in the vineyards, who paused to wish the English girl good day, and she stopped as she went to sigh from sheer contentedness. How unlike England was this pleasant land of France? How good it was to cross the seas and to see the world, thought Mary Eden, as she drew

in deep breaths of the sweet, foreign air. How delightful to sit down afterwards and describe this scene for the dear readers at home!

She had now reached the base of the little wooded hill crowned by the church, and climbed it serenely, not in the least dismayed by the solitude. For, populous and animated as had been the vineyards and suburban road below, here all was still and deserted.

Joyous and inquisitive as a child, however, the girl inspected everything: first, the church, which, although commonplace without and tawdry within, was full of interest for her; next, she wandered from one end to the other of the plateau on which it stood, for the sake of seeing the views; finally, she sat down under the trees and revelled in the delicious scene. So absorbed was she in the contemplation of the vast panorama at her feet that for the nonce the adventures of the day before were utterly forgotten. The first days of travel are so many separate existences to the young, and Mary Eden was now beginning a new little life of quiet enjoyment.

She had said to herself the night before that nothing would ever wholly efface from her memory the pale face and black eyes of the young priest; but such memories already belonged to the past, she should see him no more. She should never know what it was he wanted to say to her. They were the friends of an hour only, more's the pity, she had said, before dismissing him from her thoughts. Now her mind had opened to fresh interests.

The little interchange of civility with peasants on the way, the meeting with friends to-morrow, the various items of home news just received, all these came

in her thoughts as she sat in the deepening shadows of the September afternoon. What was her surprise when she heard a familiar voice, and, looking up, saw the young abbé standing before her!

"Will you permit me to sit down and rest a little on the bench beside you?" he asked, as he waited, bareheaded.

Her alert sense of maidenly reserve came to the rescue, although a deep blush dyed her cheeks.

"The seat is for all," she replied, "and you look very heated and weary. Pray sit down."

The last words were uttered in the sympathetic tones of yesterday, and he saw a look of tender feminine pity and concern in the sweet eyes turned towards him.

She might well feel pity. Haggard, disquieted, worn out with mental as well as bodily fatigue, the priest looked as men do on the verge of some disorder of the brain.

He seated himself and took breath, fanning himself with his hat. Then he said, looking straight into her face,

"I saw you leave the hotel an hour ago and followed in great haste. I had something to say to you."

There was nothing in Mary Eden's face as she hearkened to this speech but girlish curiosity, and the unselfish, womanly impulse to comfort and heal. It would make her inexpressibly happy to do this stranger good, although they should part forthwith and never so much as know each other's names.

The mere fact of an appeal from him enlisted her sympathy.

"I felt that it must be so last night," she said, with

quiet, Quakerish demureness and absolute self-composure, "and it made me sorry to think that we should each go our own ways and never meet any more. What is it that you want to say to me?" she added, with the downright, questioning look of a child.

The query and the manner of putting it disconcerted the priest. He looked down, coloured, began to speak and checked himself, his eyes fastened to the ground.

"Are you not happy in your religion?" she asked. "If indeed it is so," and she blushed at her own daringness, "then become a Protestant like me."

"That is impossible," said the young man, almost with the tone of one who has received an affront. "It is not the doctrines of my religion that make me unhappy, but the obligations of my calling. You must understand my meaning?"

"Yes," said the vicar's daughter, for the first time in her life called upon to counsel and admonish one of the other sex. "You find the solitary life to which a priest is condemned hard, and I am not surprised. But you may remain a Catholic and yet give up the priesthood."

"That is also impossible," was the answer, more tart than the first had been. "You do not know the strength of the parental claim in France. I must be a priest because my father wills it."

"I am very sorry for you," said the girl, her sweet pious eyes filling with tears. This poor soul yearned for home, affection, domesticity, and was shut off from them for ever!

The priest covered his eyes with his hand for a moment and sighed deeply. She thought he was weeping.

"Have you no mother nor sister, no one to make a home with you?" she asked, in the gentlest tones.

"I am alone in the world," he replied, with almost vindictive bitterness. "My father's whole life is bound up in that of my elder brother and his children. My life must be unloved and unlovely, and when I die there will not be a living soul to weep for me. The priest is a pariah, an outcast, as much cut off from the natural life of a man and a citizen as if he were a criminal of the worst kind."

There was storm and fury in his voice as he went on speaking more rapidly than before.

"It is this isolation that makes the priesthood a degraded class in France. We are but human, and yet a conduct inconsistent with humanity is exacted of us. And the obligations laid upon us are of man's, not God's making, mark the iniquity of it! It is mortal blindness, not divine ordinance, that turns so many priests into vile men. I can speak thus openly to you because you are an Englishwoman and a Protestant. I shall have your understanding, your sympathy——"

"Yes, indeed," replied poor Mary Eden, candidly as before, unwitting of anything dreadful that could lay behind this strange confidence, conscious only of a pleasure in it, of a new sense of power and self confidence thereby acquired. She was then no mere piece of feminine nothingness. She could console, admonish, maybe lead another soul to the truth!

Another thought, as unselfish as it was pleasant, flashed across her artless mind. How would her good father delight to hear that she had sowed some seeds of Protestantism by the way!

"I felt sure of obtaining a hearing from you," con-

tinued the priest, eagerly. "I read your face last night as you sat beside me at the dinner-table. Hear me and learn the secret that none other must know."

He glanced round to assure himself no listener was near, a deep blush overspread his pale face as he finished his sentence.

"I must be a priest, and a priest is forbidden to marry," he whispered, flashing his black eyes full upon her, "but what ordinance of human framing can forbid him to love?"

CHAPTER IV.

AH, me! how may a look transform the face of heaven and earth! Up to that moment the smiling landscape, the azure sky had breathed of heavenly peace and joy only to the poor girl's mind. On a sudden, swift as lightning, all was otherwise, and a gulf, undreamed of the moment before, yawned at her feet, disclosing blackness and abomination only.

The look changed everything, seen and unseen, in Mary Eden's eyes. Guileless as she was—a toddling child hardly wot more of evil—yet her pure woman's eyes could not misinterpret that look. It transformed the man beside her from a friend, a fellow-being in sympathy with her, to a creature from whom she must shrink back, flee from, and shut out from her thoughts for evermore! But she did not show any sign of shrinking, much less of terror now. Her heart still overflowed with pity for this poor human thing, hardly older than herself, but already discomfited and torn by inner conflict. She never moved from her seat, but

said, turning towards him with the soft persuasiveness of some angelic spirit trying to still the ravings of one demented.

"Since you must be a priest, put away such thoughts and live only for your vocation."

The collectedness with which she began the little sermon, and the plaintiveness of the remonstrance, instead of soothing her companion, seemed but to heighten his unreason.

"Listen," he whispered, under his breath. "I am a priest. God help me! God forgive me, but there may yet be happiness for us two if you love me."

Once more she tried to silence those wild words, for to Mary Eden—a very flower of Eden itself!—this mere assumption of reciprocated love on his part called for sympathy. He was utterly forlorn, the future stretched as a desert before him, and he had seen some one he could love, he could for a moment dream of the bliss of being loved! For the moment all other feelings were merged into those of intense pity.

"Dear friend," she said, her pretty broken French having pathos even for his ears. "There can never be happiness for those who sin against God and their own conscience."

"Yours is the blame," the young man urged, only alive to the sweet pitifulness of the maiden's speech, ready to interpret that, dwell on that, if even it might work her perdition and his own. "Why did you ask me if I were unhappy last night? Why did you look at me so searchingly, so affectionately? You saw that I was a priest. You must know that a priest is shut off from the sympathy of good women, that a priest must never be smiled at as other men. Till I beheld

you, I knew not what love was. Yours is the fault, the temptation came from you. I thought you loved me."

The girl blushed deeply, for the words struck home. Yes, in a girlish, romantic way she had loved him up till an hour ago. He had interested her, and his interest in herself had not been concealed. But how could she dream that a man may have two selves, the one amiable, attractive, harmless, the other of such kind an innocent-minded girl like herself must not know? Contrition made her gentle to him even now.

"Forgive, forgive. I am a Protestant. With us it is not so. You can understand the difference."

"Judge me not harshly then. I speak plainly to you because I know you to be my friend. I have none other in the wide, wide world. How can I surrender myself to duty, being so unhappy? I want some one to love, some one to cling to, then I should fear nothing. I could be a good priest. Pity me for the horrible life I am condemned to lead. If I keep my vows, horror of one kind; if I fail as others do, of another; no salvation, no escape."

She never for a moment lost self-possession. The man and his love were as remote from her as if a world divided them, but these were tears of compassion in her sweet eyes, and he saw them.

"You are sorry for me," he went on. "Listen then, and I will tell you what I have thought of. Oh! listen and save me. Whilst my father lives I must be a priest, but at his death—he is aged, so I may speak of this without shame—I shall be free, I shall inherit a little patrimony. An unfrocked priest cannot endure life in France, but I would go with you to your far-off

colonies. You shall be my wife! We would work for each other, love each other, and be happy."

The girl for a moment felt recalled to the old feeling of friendly, nay, affectionate, interest in him. All other thoughts were at first merged in the passionate desire of affording him consolation, hope, a future to cling to. And as he went on, pouring lover-like nothings in her ear, her own future flashed before her as in a mirror, the laboriousness of it, the monotony, the final loneliness! Undowered daughter of a poor country parson, one of many daughters, slender prospect was hers of love and marriage! Most probably instead, spinsterhood, genteel, but miserly and narrow, and spent either as a dependant on poor relations or humble companion. For a moment carried away by airy hopes, therefore, she said, looking into his face with shy, clear, confiding glances.

"You shall write to me, then. We will remain friends. You may become a Protestant; we will look forward."

"Listen again," he said, his low, swift utterances only just audible to his aghast listener. "There is but one way. Go with me now. I will take you to my old nurse, my foster-mother, who reared me and regards me as her own son. I will speak to the bishop and get my cure changed to a foreign mission in some remote settlement. There we will toil side by side till I am free to make you my wife. I will renounce the priesthood. Only love me as I love you."

"But," said the girl, cold and calm, fully alive to his meaning now, but even yet unable to flee from him without a sisterly admonition, still kindly and pitiful as some ministrant by the side of a trembling culprit

at the foot of the gibbet, "if I should thus sin for your sake, and consent to let you sin for mine, our love would be changed to hate."

"Nay, heaven could not blame such a bond?" he cried, still carried away by blind passion. "The laws of my country may change, and, as I stand before heaven, I would be true to you. The first day of my freedom should make you my wife. Is not the love of men and women for each other a good and holy thing?"

"It should be," replied the girl, slowly and sadly. "But such love is not for all. Some must be lonely and unloved all their lives."

"You could save me from worse things than isolation and forlornness," cried the priest. "I must speak openly to you, my angel-friend. Sin is forced upon the priest, because he is shut out from love and marriage. Will you not hearken to me and save my soul?"

"Would you lose my soul to save yours?" she asked, indescribable pathos weighing down the tremulous voice.

"I am better than you think me," he urged, wildly, yet not without a certain dawning contrition. "Yours should be the one love of my love, and Heaven would surely pardon our sin—if sin there be. In a year, in a month, we might be free to take each other openly for man and wife." I will try to earn my livelihood otherwise. I will renounce the priesthood."

One more effort she made on her own behalf and his, one last appeal to the higher something she still believed to be in him.

"We are young. You could write to me," she said,

looking at him earnestly, trying vainly to discern a trace of better hope in the dark face.

"You leave me thus alone, hopeless, unhappy? with sin and misery before me? you who seemed as an angel sent for my deliverance?" he cried. For she had risen and he knew right well what the action meant.

For a moment or two both were silent, he covering his face with his hands, she standing before him, an apparition of girlish grace, loveliness, and pity. Not a soul was near, no living creature within sight, and the brilliant afternoon was fast drawing to a close. Already the last rays of the setting sun crimsoned the far-off city spires, and the vine-clad hills rising around had changed from golden green to intense purple. The day was over and twilight was stealing on apace. The solitude and the desperate mood of her companion had no terrors for the placid soul of Mary Eden. Her own collectedness would overmaster him, and, were it not so, she should bid him farewell and go her ways in peace. Once again, however, the voice of unreason would make itself heard. As he looked up and saw that picture before him, so pure in outline, so fresh, so beautiful! he could no longer keep silent.

"Oh!" he whispered, "resolve ere it is too late. If you leave me now, you will be alone and I shall be alone as long as we live! There are no difficulties that may not be overcome. I have a little money. Speak the word and I will even go against my father's will for your sake! I will give up the priesthood!" He rose now and whispered in her ear. "We can hide ourselves in America. We will be married as soon as

we set foot on that free soil. There shall be no wrong, no sin. Only go with me!"

But the girl smiled pensively and shook her head. An hour had taught her so many things! She knew that these speeches were delusions and make believes only, that there was only one way of saving his soul and her own.

"At least you will let me kiss you before you go?" he asked, with that passionate vindictiveness he had used before.

Again she shook her head, lingering for a moment as if to give a benison of seraphic pity and love of holier kind! The gentleness and composure in her face might well have vanquished a fiercer mind that was tearing the soul of the unhappy man before her. It was perhaps her absolute fearlessness and self-command that quelled him, for her stock of words was exhausted now, and she was conscious of tears welling up in her throat.

"Be happy, be good," she said, pulling down her veil, and then, with a farewell he hardly heard, she slowly and deliberately descended the wooded slope. Mary Eden never looked back. Had she done so she would have seen the young abbé spring forward as if with the impulse to overtake her, to utter one word more, then as suddenly sink to the seat with head drooping on his breast, and his face hidden by his hands.

Nor did he once look up to glance at the slender, girlish figure in light-coloured dress springing down the hillside.

CHAPTER V.

Was he weeping, wondered Mary Eden, as she went on her way, herself overcome with the need to weep in secret? Was he making inner vows of righteous living, a changed creed, or yielding up his soul to the moroseness of despair?

She should never know, she said to herself sorrowfully. He had dropped out of her existence altogether; and then she wondered if he would sometimes think of the English girl and her parting words? And how would it fare with herself? Was this the first and last time the voice of love would ever be whispered in her ear? Should she, when white-haired and elderly, recall this strange scene amid the pleasant vines of France.

She hardly knew whether she was sorrowing most for him or for herself, but this she knew, that the experience was the bitterest of her young life. And one such day out of it must make all others different! She could never feel the careless Mary Eden of yestreen.

Had he only been good and a Protestant! she said to herself, with the wistfulness of a clinging woman's nature; then she shuddered as she thought of such strange coming face to face with a man's soul.

She did not deny that her first feeling had been of romantic girlish interest. All this was of the past. Henceforth she should only think of him with pity or must banish him from her memory altogether.

For the rest of that day she kept her room, feeling sad and disconsolate enough. Alas! how many new

things mixed good and evil we learn as we travel through the world, thought Mary Eden.

Next morning, what was her surprise and agitation to receive a letter addressed in a foreign handwriting. It had come by the post, and, ere her trembling fingers could break the seal, she knew well from whom!

This was Mary Eden's letter:

"A few hours only have passed since our interview," wrote the abbé, "and yet I feel as if days, months, nay, half a life-time separated me from my daring and folly! Pardon, oh, a thousand pardons! and, when you have read my letter to the end, destroy it and forget that the writer ever crossed your path.

"You are an English girl, and I trust to your honour to reveal what has happened to no living soul. I trust also somewhat to your Protestantism, which—as I understand it—leaves a human creature to settle his accounts with God, and holds him responsible to no spiritual adviser.

"I must in self-justification of my conduct tell you that you yourself were the chief cause of it. I am sure you did so much harm unintentionally, but harm it was, even grievous wrong.

"Do you know what a priest is? No, I am sure you do not, or you would never have treated me as if I were an ordinary human being on that first evening we met.

"I had always understood that your countrywomen are free from coquetry, reticent, even prudish and icy cold. What then was my amazement when you chatted to me, smiled upon me, even questioned me, showing the friendliest interest in myself and my concerns?

"I saw that you were gently born and bred, sweet,

innocent, inexperienced, yet your behaviour and position could but mislead me. You were—still so young—travelling quite alone. You told me you were going to Geneva as a governess. I imagined that you were cast on the world, and perhaps—how could I tell; at least your conduct encouraged the notion—that you were ready to fly to the farthest corner of the world with some one who loved you! Else why did you smile on me, confide in me, a priest! What may a priest like me have to do with a woman like you? Heaven forgive you for so unconsciously leading me astray! Heaven forgive me for my dread abuse of your artless candour, my wild misreading of your girlish simplicity.

“Nor imagine for a moment that I have not a bitter expiation before me for the sin towards myself. To dream of breaking my vows! To build up happiness on apostacy! To plan my own perdition whilst willing to immolate you to a frenzied passion! I shall remember you to my dying day, but my memory will be Remorse. No room for sweetness or softness in the heart you have so innocently, so cruelly wrung.

“And now farewell, and forget not that every word I whispered into your ears so wildly this afternoon, I now unsay. I am not the degraded creature I made myself out to be. I cannot be good as you artlessly bade me. No priest can be a good man. But I can do my duty zealously. I can and will discharge the obligations laid upon me with devotion and fervour. And may all the saints help me! I will pray that Religion may prove my comforter.”

Such was Mary's letter, surely the saddest a maiden ever received! Yet it comforted her inexpressibly. She

could now think of him without reluctance, and even with confidence and hope. Yes, he will obey her parting behest. He will be good and happy! and some day, years hence, they might meet again and without shame.

She drew a picture of that far-off meeting in sad, tender colours. She saw in fancy a little parish church one Sunday morning crowded with peasant folks at prayer. Service would be going on, when an English lady, a tourist, should enter to rest and pray also, and remain kneeling till the end of the service.

The priest must pass the stranger where she knelt, and for a moment their eyes would meet, and she should read in his a story of piety and self-abnegation! They might even greet each other outside the church, and the middle-aged curé would accept from the middle-aged English spinster a little gift for his poor people. She should see his schools, and hear of his good works. Then they should once more separate, never, never to meet again any more.

Thus fantastically dreamed Mary Eden, and before going away, she glanced at the visitors' book wherein the day before she had carelessly written her own name and destination.

Mary Eden, from Thornden Vicarage, England, en route for Geneva.

Immediately underneath was now written in a handwriting she knew.

The Abbé Morel, from Nantua, Savoy, en route for Les Prés, Cévennes.

And one fancy more Mary Eden might conjure up at the sight of this superscription put, as it seemed, intentionally next to her own.

Would the young priest, after years of a devoted life, find the isolation of his calling unbearable? Would he, when the hour of his freedom came, quit the priesthood for conscience and dear love's sake, and find his way to Thornden Vicarage? Would he contrive, meantime, to glance from time to time at English chronicles of domestic life in order to see if one maiden more had become a wife?

Perhaps, perhaps!

Yet we, who are older and wiser, feel somehow sure that these two beings are hardly more likely to meet than if denizens of another planet. Priest and maiden had crossed each other's path by some unwonted hazard, but what conjunction of stars could bring them together again?

Nevertheless, seeing that nothing is so unexpected but that it may happen to-morrow, we may echo poor Mary's pensive, perhaps, perhaps!

DÉSILLUSIONNÉ.

CHAPTER I.

My Harry, when, an hour ago, I kissed your beardless cheek and we wrung each other's hands, perhaps for the last time, there were words of warning I was fain to whisper in your ear, but dared not. I, your father, on the eve of a separation that may be final, lacked courage to speak of things weightier far than life or death. How it may fare with other young men on the threshold of their career, I know not. So much I can aver. In the place of my dead father, none of my blood and name whispered such words into my own ear. Even now I would rather not read you a lesson in morals. I think I shall best help you to keep the straight path by telling you how the warning came. I give, therefore, in the following pages a short, unvarnished account of what happened to me when I was about your own age and like yourself thrown suddenly upon the world. Like yourself, too, how little fitted, either by temperament or education, for the world's temptations!

My mother would not suffer her only son to encounter what she called the pollution of a public

school. She chose my companions with as much care as if I had been a girl. A girl indeed were hardly more unsuspicious of certain forms of evil than your father at the time of which I write. Whether I have done wisely or not in bringing you up in the same plan, I cannot tell. I have done my best, and remember I speak for once and for all to-day. You are a man, and must henceforth bear the consequences of your own acts. Keep this paper, and years hence you may be glad to give it to your own son as I now give it to mine.

When I was sent to London to study for the bar, my introductions brought me the acquaintance of a fellow-student, many years my senior and in most things my superior. Personally popular, already a man of the world, my new friend Meynell was the very opposite to the quiet, unsophisticated lad he chose as boon companion. For boon companions we soon became, and he good-naturedly undertook to introduce me to the world and its ways. As his prospects were excellent, and his family was connected by marriage with my own, I had been especially bidden to cultivate him.

"Don't lose sight of Meynell," my uncle had said to me. "He comes of a good old stock. He will be a baronet some day. Of such should be your friends."

"Of such should be your friends!" So it seemed to myself after a few weeks of Meynell's chaperoning.

The pleasant life, the lazy time! I foolishly but naturally wished it to last for ever. We did indeed both write after a fashion, and when winter came

round agreed that we should work in earnest. My fond mother and good uncle were not dissatisfied. I was seeing the world, I was being made a man of; so long as I gave a strict account of the money supplied to me, and incurred no debts, they were easy.

Boon companions although we were, it was impossible for me not to feel that Meynell played the patron. He made little attempt to conceal a certain good-natured contempt for what he was pleased to call my girlishness. I had no taste for smoking. I was a poor hand at billiards, and pigeon-shooting was without attraction for me. And my naïveté and ignorance of the world and its ways amused him not a little. But he was so pleasant and friendly that I bore with his raillery and almost loved him like a brother.

One day towards the latter end of June, he proposed to me that we should take a ride in the country.

"I have a visit to make by the way," he said, with affected indifference. "But that need not spoil your ride, and a gallop in the open is more to your taste, I darsesay, than a pair of pretty eyes."

"No," I said, laughingly. "If you are going to visit a home where there are pretty girls, you must take me too or I shall stay behind."

He perused me curiously. Then a certain look of indecision came over him, and was it mere fancy?—he seemed to blush.

"We will see," was the quiet reply. "But now, my man, to horse. We must not lose a minute of this perfect afternoon!"

I shall ever keep freshly in my mind the memory of that June day. As we rode slowly out of London,

the air became fragrant with suburban gardens, and once fairly in the country we were in a world of roses. Roses, roses everywhere! The sweet smells, the brilliant skies, the canter through wooded lanes, exhilarated me beyond measure. How good to be young, free, and careless on such a day! Had anyone told me tales of sin, wretchedness, and suffering under those warm heavens, amid those flowery lawns, I should hardly have believed them. We passed cottage after cottage shut in by very Edens of bosquet and rose bushes, each echoing with gay young voices, each peopled with girls in white. What room was there for harm and evil doing in such a world?

After riding for a couple of hours, Meynell suddenly stopped short at the opening of a narrow lane umbrageous with limes.

Again he looked at me mysteriously, and again it seemed to me that the ever ready, ever unconcerned Meynell slightly reddened.

"My errand is here," he said. "You can go with me if you like."

I smiled and nodded. We turned our horses' heads, and without a word passed down the linden grove.

Never had I seen so dainty a dwelling as we came to at last, for the lane had many windings and our destination was at the extreme end. The delicious little nest! Who could have built it? All pretty things were here on a small scale: cool verandah, flower garden, velvety lawn, and fragrant shrubberies, whilst tripping down the steps came the most distractingly pretty creature I had ever seen.

She had fair hair and soft rosy cheeks with many

a dimple. Her eyes were large, blue, and full of frolic, and she was dressed in white as became the season, with flowers on her bosom and in her hair. Very young still, she seemed partly to domineer over Meynell and partly to look up to him for protection. In fact her behaviour was to me very extraordinary, and my first notion was that she must be his ward, the orphan of some friends confided to his care in the romantic way that we read of in novels.

She came tripping down the steps then, her white skirt gathered up in one hand, her little feet glittering in embroidered slippers, and, without a greeting vouchsafed to either of us, tossed towards Meynell an empty purse. The deed, playfully as it was done, seemed to irritate my companion, and, before she could utter the word on her rosy lips, he was at her side, whispering in her ear.

She came to me at once and held out her hand.

"I am very glad to see you," she said. "We will have strawberries and cream in the garden and then play some game or other."

Meynell led round the horses to a miniature stable at the back, the little lady went indoors to give her orders, and soon tea was spread in the arbour. Tea, did I say? it was rather a banquet, for unheard-of dainties came out of that fairy larder. There were foreign pasties, a bottle of sparkling wine, lastly, the most wonderful strawberries and cream in the world.

It was little we said, but we were very merry. I had never seen Meynell in such a mood. He sang snatches of song. He asked us absurd riddles. He made childish jokes, and when we had eaten up everything begged me to play a waltz.

"You shall play whilst Rosey and I dance this time," he said, "and next time we will see."

But, although I had set my heart on it, I got no waltz with Rosey. The little lady expressed her willingness, even pouted at Meynell's refusal to play for us. He only laughed, and fanning himself in a corner said that Rosey and I might play at battledore and shuttlecock if we liked.

We flew into the garden and played wildly, Rosey's golden hair soon falling in tumbled masses over her shoulders. Meynell soon came out to look on, and the pair pretended to quarrel all the time. It was a style of banter I was wholly unaccustomed to, and this lovely, frolicsome, daring Rosey was certainly unlike any woman of my acquaintance. I saw Meynell frown from time to time, but it hardly checked a nonchalance and an *abandon* I found embarrassing.

I set down such blemishes to inexperience and exuberant spirits, and thought her the most bewitching creature in the world. I could easily understand the sense of freedom she felt with me. We must have been nearly of an age, whilst Meynell was many years our senior.

"Rosey," he cried at last, "that game is intolerably long. Sit down by me and gather up your hair."

She coquettishly did as she was bidden, making him hold her little gold comb and flowers, burying her warm cheeks for a moment under the veil of silken locks. Then, with the engaging antics of a kitten, she knotted them up, now catching one yellow tress between her ivory teeth, now giving me its fellow to hold. For a long time the spectacle lasted, and Meynell and I both gazed spell-bound. This rosy,

merry, mischievous girl had nothing fairylike or elvish about her; the fascination was all of human, earthly kind. Yet no picture could be prettier than the one she made as she sat amid her deep red roses binding up her golden curls.

The hair-dressing over, she sprang up with a gay laugh and darted into the shrubbery.

"Rosey is playing at hide and seek," Meynell said; then, with knit brows, he picked up a glittering object from the ground. "The careless little creature! one would suppose gold bracelets to be as plentiful as blackberries," he added, coolly pocketing the ornament.

Rosey's voice now reached us from some distant hiding-place, and he ran off in pursuit. For an hour or more the thickets of rose and laburnum echoed with her shouts and laughter. At last, when we were all tired out, Meynell begged me to look to the horses, whilst he retired with Rosey to the honeysuckle arbour.

When I had done my errand, I saw that they were still in deep confabulation, and, unwilling to disturb them, sat down to the piano. From the music-stool I could see the pair, and, as I played idly from memory, I watched them all the time.

What was the meaning of the little pantomime going on under the honeysuckles? Not a word reached me where I sat, but I could see every gesture, Rosey's open palm stretched out again and again, Meynell placing one gold piece in it after another with many an expostulation between each action. He was leaning forward with one hand supporting his head, the other guarding his purse, and it was long before the purse found its way back into his pocket. Even then he seemed to remonstrate, but she played at ball with

her gold pieces unconcernedly as a child; she held them to her cheek, she petted them as if they were living things, she continued to fondle them till again Meynell began to scold. Undismayed by the scolding, she piled the money into a little heap on the table, and made him play a foolish game with her, she all frolic and content, he not wholly, yet won over to a genial mood.

Meantime the long summer twilight came to an end, and the pair, seeming to have forgotten my very existence, still talked together in the arbour. I could just distinguish Rosey's white dress, and that was all. But the sound of chinking coin that reached my ears still told me the nature of their topic.

By the time we had taken unceremonious leave, and were on our way back to London, an argent moon had climbed the heavens, and the country roads were deserted. Meynell seemed in no humour for talk, and all kinds of new and wonderously strange thoughts disturbed my mind. I felt that I could never again be the careless lad of a week ago.

CHAPTER II.

EXACTLY a year had passed since that visit with Meynell to the little lady of the honeysuckle bower. I never repeated it, and my former patron and instructor in the ways of the world was now no longer at my side to invite me. Unexpected circumstances had called him from London and his studies, and, long before, he owned that he found me a tiresome companion.

"You are too curious and too simple," he would say, laughing; "I cannot quite make you out. A clergyman's son may well be a prig. But do you never mean to cut yourself loose from your mother's apron-string?"

The words did not put me out of temper; they infused poison into my mind. I said nothing to him at the time, truth to tell, I loved him no longer; but I determined secretly that, after my twenty-first birthday, I would do as he said, I would free myself from the bondage of childhood, and live as became a man, holding myself responsible towards no human being. Such lessons as life had to teach me, it was beholden on me to learn, without asking leave of anyone.

Now it happened that my twenty-first birthday fell on the anniversary of my visit to Rosey, and I knew not how it was, but I determined to keep it with her. Meynell and I kept up no correspondence. I hardly knew whether, indeed, to expect to find Rosey in her bower. The little bird might have flown long ago, leaving no trace behind. The impulse was, however, too strong upon me, and the summer-tide and the thought of a long ride in the country too tempting to resist. So it came about that on a perfect July afternoon I found myself on the way to Rosey alone.

I was bolder of heart than when I had first threaded the linden grove under Meynell's protection; there was a little gold necklet in my breast-pocket destined for the white throat of the rosy, dimpled, golden-haired creature I still saw before me as a picture. I felt unabashed at the notion of an interview. I whistled gaily as I bent my head to escape the over-arched lime-boughs, and jauntily sprang from my saddle before the

well-remembered gate. The place looked the same, and, leaving my horse tied up under shadow at the back, I passed through the little garden to the front door. It was full of roses as before. I saw teacups standing on the rustic table on which we had banqueted so merrily. All the air breathed languor and deliciousness.

But where was Rosey?

I lifted the knocker of the front door once, twice in vain. Then I touched the bell, but no one answered the summons. There seemed, however, no occasion to stand upon ceremony, so, availing myself of the bay-window, I stepped into the little parlour.

The piano stood in its accustomed place. I sat down straightway and rattled off a waltz. I sang, I whistled, but nothing came of it. Next, being drowsy with the sultriness and the long ride, I leaned back in an easy chair and fell asleep.

The sleep may not have lasted long, but it was full of dreams. I dreamed of Meynell, and Rosey, and of the afternoon we had spent together a year ago. We were in the garden, now playing battledore and shuttlecock, now at hide and seek, Rosey's glowing cheek, Rosey's bright eye near me at one moment, vanishing the next. The air seemed alive with her merry, mocking laughter; like a sprite, she would come near us in our game, yet never suffer herself to be caught. Next Meynell left us sulkily, and Rosey and I were in the garden alone. I bounded forward; I held her fast. I was about to punish the culprit with a kiss. My lips touched her rosy mouth, and I awoke.

CHAPTER [III.]

"WHERE is Rosey?" I asked, half dreaming, for something had awakened me rudely.

"Where is Rosey?" repeated a harsh, reproving voice. "Go home, young sir, you have no business here."

I was now alert in a moment, and sprang to my feet scarlet with shame and indignation. Spies had been set upon my doings; I was still a child in my mother's eyes! These two ill-dressed, hard-voiced men could be none of Rosey's friends. What business theirs, forsooth, in such a bower?

For a moment we eyed each other in silence, the well-dressed, gentlemanly, blushing stripling who had come as Rosey's lover, the stolid, burly intruders who looked like hirelings of the law in disguise.

For my first impression now vanished. I felt sure that these men were no emissaries from my own home, but had come here on Rosey's account. Their looks boded ill to her, not to me. Overcome with anxiety, I now tried to assume a protective air, determined to make a stand and assert myself on Rosey's behalf.

"Can I see Rosey?" I asked.

The pair looked first at me, then at each other significantly, and a glance of understanding passed between them. The foremost, who was better dressed than his companion and of a superior appearance altogether, now took it upon himself to answer. His speech was rough and his manner hard, but I cannot say that he was forbidding.

"See her, young gentleman? Certainly. It can do

her no harm. Poor soul: and may do you good. Come with me."

Without a word more he led me to an inner room. No wonder that my knees trembled; tears seemed choking me, and I sank into a chair unable to utter a word.

This indeed was Rosey, but the beaming, lovely, living Rosey of my recollection no longer. She was dead! She had evidently died of some wasting disease and alone.

No pious hand had composed the rigid limbs or arrayed them in the solemn ceremonies of the grave, no gentle touches had smoothed the disordered hair that hung, so beautiful still upon her shoulders. No friendly hand so much as closed the poor eyes!

"Oh! Rosey, Rosey!" I cried, covering my own to shut out the awful sight; and, in spite of the presence of my companions, I wept bitterly. It was the first time I had ever gazed upon death.

When I had a little recovered myself, I glanced round the room, and saw that some unscrupulous hand, or, might be, dire want, had emptied it of every woman's treasure. Not a trinket on the dressing-table, not an ornament on the mantelpiece, not a gown in the open wardrobe! No flowers had cheered the sick girl, no friendly delicacy of neighbours' sending had tempted her appetite, no Bible was there for consolation. An empty glass that had held some kind of drug stood on a chair by the bedside, and that was all.

My guide had left me alone for a little, but was once more beside me, gazing on the still white face of the dead Rosey.

"It's a sad business," he said. "But such things happen every day. I am a father myself, and you are quite a lad. I hope——"

Then he looked at me significantly, and said no more.

"I was never here but once. Mr. Meynell brought me last year," I replied. "Does he know?"

My interlocutor shrugged his shoulders.

"Can't say. And what if he did?"

"Has she left no friend?" I asked, again musing sorrowfully. She was about my own age. We had played together. It seemed horrible to die thus, unmourned and alone.

"One friend, young sir," answered the man. "Yes, one good friend."

I looked up eagerly. Meynell's neglect had not perhaps been unprovoked, or perhaps in this hard-featured, yet not wholly unpitying man, Rosey had found a benefactor.

"Who should it be?" was the rough, anticipating answer. "The parish, of course."

I paused for a moment aghast, then ventured on one question more.

"Would it not be possible to find out her relations?" I asked, timidly.

"Much thanks we should get! These women have no relations. The parish buries, no one puts on black," he said, grimly. "It is as I say, a bad business but common as day."

"And did she die quite alone?" I asked, for that thought seemed to me more unbearable than any. So young, so lately full of frolic, so careless, to die alone!

"She might have come to us. The parish is not unhandsome," replied my companion. "But come, young gentleman, this is no place for you. Time is going. We must be busy."

I knew I should be ridiculed as a sentimentalist, but I would have my way in one thing. I saw that my companion was not rich, and he had spoken to me of his children. I resolved to win him over.

"Do not let her be laid in a grave like a pauper," I entreated, and I pulled out my purse and the gold locket I had destined for Rosey. "Give your daughter this, it was bought at a jeweller's this morning, and take this and this;" I slipped some guineas into his hand. "Only let Rosey be clothed softly and in white, and put a pillow under her head and flowers in her hands and on her bosom."

I emptied my purse into his rough palm and added, blind with tears,

"Lilies and roses—she was innocent once—and fair white grave-clothes. Promise."

"On my word, I will do as you wish," said the man. "Come to the Union to-morrow evening and you shall see her laid out like a lady. And thank you kindly for the locket. My Polly is fifteen to-morrow. She'll jump for joy."

I went next day, and found that he had been as good as his word. The flowers were there, white roses and lilies, she lay clothed in fine-spun lawn of purest white; the beautiful disordered locks were gathered up and the poor head now reposed on a fair white pillow. All was solemn, and decent, and becoming. The man gazed with dry eyes, but I could not refrain from tears as I silently bade her farewell.

"I'm sure I couldn't wish my own child to look nicer in her coffin," said my companion, "my missus it was who sat up all night to make the shroud (it had to be done on the sly, you know,) and the children

made the wreaths. I hope you are satisfied, sir—but pray step into my parlour before you go away. My Polly cannot rest till she has thanked you for the locket.”

We went out. He locked the door and then opened another near it.

A rosy-cheeked hoyden, with a baby brother on her shoulder, now came forward and stammered out blushing thanks. The mother stood by the table sewing, with another little daughter by her side; the family board was spread. All was love and peace and innocence, and there in a room close by lay Rosey, dead in her youth and beauty, with none to weep for her.

“The young gentleman looks tired. Give him a glass of wine, mother,” said my host. “We always have a bottle of wine on Polly’s birthday, she being the eldest, you see, sir; and you, Milly, say your pretty piece.”

“We try to bring up our children nicely,” put in the mother. “Handsome is as handsome does, I always say to my girls, and I am sure they see every day with their own eyes what a pretty face leads to. I don’t like to speak evil of the dead, sir, but to think of a young thing like that——”

And she pointed towards the room where poor Rosey lay.

“Come, mother, let the little one say her piece,” interposed the man, and, what with the child’s performances and the good people’s hospitality, it was late ere I returned home.

But not to sleep. I straightway sat down and wrote a long letter to Meynell, telling him everything, and, young as I was, not without a tone of bitter reproach. Rosey’s forlorn end had shocked me inexpressibly, and I did not care if Meynell found my

letter exaggerated, or even presumptuous, I could not conceal my thoughts.

To my astonishment he took no notice of this first letter; so, fearing lest it might have gone astray, I wrote another.

An interval of weeks had passed, yet I wrote with even more emphasis than before. I was still haunted by the vision of Rosey's white face. I could but blame Meynell for thus abandoning her at the last. She had died of rapid consumption, they told me, as those rosy, fair-headed girls often do, and had chosen to die neglected and alone rather than give up her liberty. And this I told Meynell over again, and, to my second letter, a reply did come.

Meynell wrote at length and in high spirits. First of all he told me of his improved prospects owing to the death of a relation. He should now give up the bar and betake himself to the occupation of a country gentleman, sit on the bench, lead the hunt, and so forth. Next he told me of his coming marriage.

It was a marriage against which his most fastidious relations could take no exceptions. The young lady belonged to a good old family; she was rich, handsome, and accomplished.

Then after more personal news of the same kind, and he had signed himself my affectionate friend, he seemed suddenly to recollect that there was still something to say.

Here is Meynell's postscript.

"For Heaven's sake, my good fellow, send me no more particulars about that unfortunate creature. I but sowed my wild oats like the rest. Let Rosey be."

THE THREE B. A.'S.

CHAPTER I.

A DREARIER day in November could not be imagined, and as one omnibus crawled through the muddy London streets after another, setting up and taking down damp and bedraggled passengers, the well-known fable of Charon's boat might have occurred to some minds.

Depression was written on every face, and no wonder. With a leaden sky and persistent rain, mud clinging to every one's shoes and wet dripping from every one's umbrella, who could show a cheerful countenance? Youth, however, is proof against worse circumstances, and one at least of the crowds going westward by omnibus that day looked a veritable apparition of hopefulness and animated zest in life. She was a young lady whose calling proclaimed itself at a glance. Teachers of the gentle sex have ever abounded, but it is not till within recent years that a race of learned young women has sprung up, occupying the professorial chair like Calderon's heroine, Eugenia, and, although not wearing it, entitled to the academic gown. Of such was this young lady, and

Portia's dress would not have so well become her as the dark-green winter garment fitted to her slender figure and the little black velvet hat so coquettishly worn on the small, pretty head. For, whatever snarling satirists may say, grace is compatible with Greek, and the head full of Newton's *Principia* may be as charmingly dressed and adorned as the head that is full of nothing.

This learned girl, then, whom we will call Eugenia after Calderon's heroine, was, like her, as beautiful as she was learned, and a glance at the dark eyes fringed so softly with deep lashes told that, gentleness itself, the kind of woman who would pick up a stray starving dog and carry it home, who could not turn her face from misery and forget it as if it were not. She could not help being compassionate, whether the object of her compassion proved worthy or not.

Eugenia had journeyed for half a mile or so when, with a sudden blush of consternation, yet with rapid decision, she bade her neighbour stop the omnibus.

"Conductor," she said, not shrinking from the painful task imposed upon her, "I am very sorry, but my purse is gone, and no one has quitted the omnibus since I felt in my pocket a few minutes ago."

It was certainly a disagreeable dilemma enough, to tell these well-dressed ladies and gentlemen that one of them was a pickpocket! Disagreeable duty to fall to anyone, much less to a young girl full of confidence in her fellows and unwilling to believe ill of any.

But it must be done. Her purse was missing;

she had fallen among thieves. She glanced round, meeting disconcerted eyes and looks of indignation on every side. Half a dozen purses were straightway produced to show that their owners needed not those of others. Ladies opened their bags, the men professed themselves quite willing to be searched.

"The young lady may have dropped her purse," said one bluff City gentleman, "or may still have it about her. Ladies are always losing this, that, or the other, whilst they have it all the time."

"We are not thieves, anyhow," retorted a well-dressed, pert young milliner with a band-box in her hand.

"Let all the fares stand up and shake themselves," suggested the conductor. The purse may have stuck to somebody unawares."

All stood up and did, as they were bid, whereupon a tall, spare man of scholarly and even distinguished appearance, in spite of a look of extreme shabbiness, stooped down and then produced from under the folds of his loose overcoat the missing purse.

"Here, madam, is your purse," he said, bowing coldly, and yet with a flush for a moment mantling his pale cheeks. He did not add—"It was lying on the ground."

The girl's face glowed with generous pity and shame. The thing was transparent! Her purse had fallen to the ground, but had been intentionally withheld from the owner. This man, confronting her, was hardly older than herself, and evidently belonged to the same class of life. What had brought him to such dire straits?

Quick as lightning too now came a vague recognition. The face turned towards her own was not that of a stranger, and the voice had a familiar sound, although she could not at first connect it with any event in her past life.

There was no time for thought, for, the bustle of this little incident over, the omnibus stopped to set down many passengers, Eugenia and the tall scholar among others.

They were now at the top of a quiet little street leading out of the Edgware Road, and the girl's eyes followed the movements of the stranger curiously. He was an old acquaintance, of that she felt sure. Yet who could he be? Who could he be?

He was not looking at her, but she saw that he lingered as one without any fixed purpose, as if indeed he had nowhere to go; and the momentary glance told her more.

She realized now the threadbareness of the clothes he wore, the sallowness of his complexion, the shrunken look of the lower limbs. He looked, indeed, not only forlorn but famished, and not only famished but desponding. Might not the concealed purse indicate such a tale of want and wretchedness as seldom comes to the surface? What if this fellow-being needed even a night's shelter or a bit of bread?

Secretly shrinking, yet emboldened by her generous purpose, she darted forward suddenly and held up her purse.

"Oh!" she cried, with tears in her eyes, "forgive me if I have judged amiss. But you look so woe-begone, so blank. Do you want money?"

Then she suddenly recollected him and uttered his

name. Yes, it could be no other. In this pale, threadbare stranger, she saw George Ibbetson, her fellow-student of four years before, whose name had appeared with her own in that year's list of B.A.'s. Since then everything had prospered with herself, how was it that he had fallen so low?

"Yes, it is I," he said, trying to smile. "But we cannot talk here? May I accompany you a little way, or are you ashamed of being seen in company of an out-at-elbows ragamuffin like myself?"

"Pray do come with me," answered the young lady, with prompt decision. Ibbetson's family was known to her, his sisters had been her schoolfellows, she had danced with him and played lawn-tennis with him in their happy Cambridge days. He might have fallen on evil days, but he could not have become disreputable. So at least she believed, judging him by the standard of former acquaintance.

They walked down the little street together, Ibbetson carrying her books and umbrella; it seemed impossible to Eugenia that he could be unworthy of her confidence.

"Things have prospered with you, I see," he began, sadly and admiringly. This slender, handsome, well-dressed girl, with her unclouded brow, bright and fearless ways, seemed to put sunshine into the leaden streets and even into his heavy heart.

"Yes indeed," answered Eugenia, "I have as many pupils as I can find time for, and I have made a home with a fellow-student also a professor. We work hard and are very happy."

Then she turned to him kindly and inquisitively, and, noticing his look of bodily weakness, added,

"It is close by here, our little home. Come in and take a glass of wine, then you can tell me all that has befallen yourself."

"You would not present such a scarecrow to your friend," the young man answered, "and I should not be seen in your company. It might do you harm."

"This is the street and here is the house in which we lodge," said the girl, decidedly; "you had much better come in."

Ibbetson still hesitated. A deep flush once more overspread his sallow cheeks, and he glanced at his shabby gear desperately. But Eugenia would have her way.

"Cecilia, my friend, will not be in for half an hour. You can go before that time if you prefer it," she said. "To talk in the cold damp streets is out of the question."

She took out her latch key, and he followed her upstairs into the pretty drawing-room without a word. Then she placed biscuits before him and put a glass of wine in his trembling hand.

The kindly action, the charming room with its bright fire, the flowers, piano, and books, a thousand and one suggestions of home and beautiful feminine tastes, were too much for the young man who had not tasted food that day and knew not where that night to lay his head. The wine warmed his heart and the food restored in a measure his feeble powers, but for all that he could not control himself, and burst into tears.

What could Eugenia do but console and cheer him as some Sister of Mercy an outcast picked up in the streets? All her womanly pitifulness and sympathy

were called forth by the spectacle before her, a fellow-being, like herself, on the threshold of life, but with bitterness and despair in his heart instead of promise and contentment. The shock of the contrast between his circumstances and her own came with all the more force because they had both chosen the same career. Ibbetson, too, after finishing his classical studies, had begun life as a professor. Her own path so far was crowned with success, whilst his had evidently lain amid thorns and sloughs of despair. She must get him to unburden himself to her, then help him as best she could.

"Do not weep," she said. "Talk to me as to a sister; tell me your misfortunes from the beginning."

"Misfortunes!" cried the young man, bitterly. "I am myself a misfortune. Why was I born into a world that does not want me? But first let me tell you one thing. When your purse dropped by my side to-day, I did intend to conceal it and carry it away with me. What should a starving man do but steal?"

Eugenia smiled sadly.

"Nay," she said, and without any demur taking from her desk some gold pieces, she put them in his hand, "that temptation, if it were such indeed, shall not again be yours. Keep my money, and pay it back when you are flourishing."

He shook his head.

"You are kinder than the angels, but you are holding out a straw to a drowning man," he said. "I have been brought too low."

"Nonsense," she replied, cheerfully, forcing the money upon him. "And now let me hear your story as quickly as you can tell it. When Cecilia comes in, we will have tea as if nothing had happened."

Again he glanced at his forlorn garments.

"Never fear that your appearance will be noticed," added the young lady, in the same tones of prompt decision. Then she said, smilingly, "We are much too busy, you know, to notice people's clothes. Cecilia would not observe it if you wore the costume of a tomahawk Indian."

Smiling somewhat grimly at this well-intentioned remark, the young man began his story.

CHAPTER II.

"AFTER all," said Ibbetson, bound, as Eugenia told him, to get through his narrative in a quarter of an hour, "my story may be told in three words—one too many! Is not that the history, might not that be the epitaph, of thousands?"

"I do not think so," replied Eugenia. "We are all wanted, the knotty point is to find out *where*. If you have not succeeded in England, try new worlds, there are now so many!"

"Ay for those who can use their sinews and muscles. But for the scholar, the man of books?" Well, let me begin. I began life therefore four years ago, like yourself, as a visiting tutor. It seemed to me a becoming and leisurely life; nine months of the year, perhaps, in London, with time for recreation, and a long summer holiday abroad. I intended to devote my spare time to literature and to go a little into society, but pupils did not come, literature had too many devotees already. Even in society, I found myself one too many."

"You cannot have set to work in the right way,"

Eugenia answered. "I know that every intellectual field is full of workers to overflowing. But each task falls to the fittest, and only the weak go to the wall."

"Then I am of the weak, or, it maybe, in my case pride has proved my stumbling block. I started without introductions to begin with; belonging to north country folks, I had no one to further my wishes at the onset, and the task of seeking employment was very distasteful to me from the first. Work itself I relished and could never have too much of. But to have to carry my wares to market, to offer them in vain to one after another, to have the cold shoulder turned upon me again and again. It was this I could not bear."

"You have certainly been unfortunate if you could get but little to do, and always came in contact with disagreeable people. My own experience has been exactly the opposite," Eugenia answered. Then rising she took up a letter lying on the table. "By the way, this very day I have been asked to prepare two lads for Eton. I have enough work. I will introduce you in my place."

Ibbetson followed her with eyes too sad to brighten as yet even under such cheering influences.

"Why," he went on, after thanking her as best he could—"Why are men and women born into a world already too full of them? You could find a hundred as thankful as myself to earn a few pounds, and thus stave off the need of an hour, but what afterwards? Well, let me go on."

"Yes," replied Eugenia, looking at the time-piece. "My friend is punctuality itself. At the stroke of the clock we shall hear her tap."

"I have no tragedy to tell," Ibbetson went on,

"only a story, common enough, I fear, of miserable failure and yielding to circumstance. Had I been less sensitive, less foolishly susceptible, you may say, I should doubtless have elbowed my way to the front like many another. Finding that the more I sought after work, the less, so at least it seemed to me, it came to hand, I resigned myself proudly and bitterly to the inevitable. In other words I set myself the task of living without a livelihood! I had ever imagined that I was endowed with a literary turn, and now began to write several essays and dissertations that had long been in my thoughts. I fancied that these, being novel both in subject and treatment, might serve as an introduction to our leading reviews. Each came back pencilled with the odious editorial D, and meantime I had come to an end of my worldly resources. The truth dawned on me all of a sudden. I must beg or starve."

"You gave up the game too quickly," Eugenia interrupted. "We might all fall into the same evil plight if we set up despairing at the least little check. You should have tried and tried and tried again."

The young man sat silent and humiliated.

"We cannot alter our characters," he said. "And, if I have fallen low, it has been through pride, not idleness or sin. It seemed to me horrible that a scholar and a gentleman in search of employment should be driven from door to door, not worse, certainly, than for the labourer, spade on shoulder; but then, his case does not touch us so nearly. From our cradle upward we have known softness and ease, and to wake up in this wilderness of London without a future, without daily bread having fellowship with the

half-naked wretch at the street-crossing to feel drawn towards the abominable abyss of crime! God forgive me if in thought, indeed, I have been criminal!"

"Let us now not talk any more," Eugenia said, very kindly. "You look exhausted, and I know enough to be very sorry for you. You will stay and have a cup of tea with us, then to-morrow I will make the arrangement for you about the two Eton boys I mentioned just now."

"Oh!" cried Ibbetson, overcome with humiliation, "what can I say? How can I accept, how refuse? Yet, to tell you the plain truth, I ought to go away and hide myself from your sight for ever. I have fallen too low, too low," he sighed, covering his face with his hands.

"In thought, but not in deed," said Eugenia, feeling that she ought to know all. "Tell me one little thing only. It is your forlornness only that makes you hesitate; there has been no degradation."

"As I stand before you, and in the sight of heaven, no!" exclaimed the young man. "Your purse dropped at my feet. I said to myself that it would save me from starving, perhaps self-destruction, and should be restored to the owner in better days. That is the truth, and nothing but the truth."

Eugenia shook him warmly by the hand, then put her finger on her lip.

"Not a word more!" she whispered. "The clock strikes five, and there is Cecilia. I shall introduce you to each other as if nothing had happened."

CHAPTER III.

THERE entered a small, animated personage about the same age as Eugenia and her companion; beautiful she was not, yet there was charm in the broad brow, with its close dark curls, and piquancy about the mouth, fashioned for wit rather than sentiment. The black eyes, too, were full of vivacity, and the symmetrical little figure neatness itself.

"Mr. Ibbetson, a former acquaintance and fellow student," said Eugenia, carelessly by way of introduction, whereupon the three sat down to the little teatable without further ceremony or ado. The new-comer was in the highest spirits, and at once began talking easily and even confidentially. He was looked upon as a comrade who could but enter into her feelings and sympathise with her views of life generally.

"Eugenia!" she cried, as she helped herself briskly to bread and jam. "I have such wonderful news for you. I could laugh and cry all in a breath. My fortune is made."

Eugenia looked up from the tea-pot quietly. She was evidently accustomed to her friend's enthusiastic way of looking at things, and was not prepared for much in the way of a surprise.

"Is it not delightful?" continued Cecilia, turning towards the visitor. "At least it would be delightful were there no Eugenias to leave behind! I am then offered the professorship of mathematics at the new university of women in New Zealand—the name of the place I forget—at a salary of three hundred pounds a year with chambers. I always wanted to see the new

world. It is to me an enchanting prospect—with drawbacks.”

Eugenia stretched out her hand and the two friends were for a moment silent, tears standing in their eyes. Then Cecilia, wiping her own once more, turned to Ibbetson and said,

“Mr. Ibbetson, do help me. I am asked to find a classical tutor, as it is not thought desirable that the whole staff should consist of women. There must be many men who would welcome the notion.”

Eugenia looked delighted.

“Really,” she answered, paying no attention to Ibbetson’s downcast looks. “You come with Fortunatus’ purse to-day, Cissy. This very moment Mr. Ibbetson was telling me of his wish to find some settled occupation. The sea-voyage would be good for your health,” she added, very kindly to Ibbetson. “Yes, you should, you must accept.”

“I must first be accepted myself,” the young man answered. “I have grave doubts.”

“I do not think that any difficulties will be put in the way,” Cecilia said, having first scrutinised her interlocutor somewhat closely. He looked haggard, shabby, and somewhat desponding, but was evidently a gentleman and a scholar. His looks on the whole pleased and interested her.

“Have you been very ill?” she asked.

He smiled grimly and was about to make some bitter speech when Eugenia came to the rescue.

“Mr. Ibbetson has had anxieties to pull him down, not illness; the sea-voyage and the change will quite restore him. I only wish I could go with you both,” she said.

"That would indeed be delightful. And why not? This life in London is very wearing. Do turn it over in your mind," urged Cecilia.

The other shook her head.

"I have little brothers and sisters to provide for and look after! No, Cissy, my post is here. But you and Mr. Ibbetson have no such ties; you do well to seek your fortunes in the new world."

The pair talked on, Ibbetson listening as one in a dream. What part or lot had he with these bright girls to whom life and daily toil seemed so good and fair? How could his gloomy spirit enter into their hopes and aspirations? No, he would go his own dreary ways, and leave them to a happiness he could never share. Another thought also, perhaps not unnaturally, occurred to the young man. Was he not here, as in the world, one too many? He was young, well-favoured, as he knew right well, and belonging to their own social sphere, yet he did not in the least interest them for these reasons, only because he was a fellow-being in misfortune. Truly here was a lesson for masculine as well as human vanity, "A man's a man for a' that." Dejection and poverty had well-nigh crushed Ibbetson's spirit, but the heart of a man still beat within his breast. He could not be insensible to the beauty of these two girls, the one all quiet tenderness and grace, the other all fire and impulse. Eugenia's lovely eyes, Cecilia's piquant smiles, were stirring him with new, pleasing emotion. Never in his life, he said to himself, had he seen two beings so unique and so attractive, and he could never be anything to them but a poor, crushed creature whom they had befriended.

Meantime the meal was over, and he felt obliged to take leave, promising Cecilia to meet her by appointment to-morrow, and offer himself as a candidate for the vacant post in the Antipodes, a promise he did not feel sure of keeping.

CHAPTER IV.

HE kept his word, however, and the mere fact of his doing so proved the turning-point in Ibbetson's fortunes. His appearance created a favourable impression on the committee appointed to choose a candidate. The appointment was awarded to him. He was to sail with Cecilia in three weeks' time. The matter was talked over in the girls' pretty lodgings.

"I rejoice with all my heart," Eugenia said, holding out her hands to the young man with a sisterly smile of encouragement. "The sea-voyage will restore your health, and you will send me the most flourishing accounts of yourself. It is sad for me to lose my friend, but hardly a blow. She had long entertained such a project."

"It would make me utterly miserable to leave Eugenia, were she an ordinary mortal. Her philosophy raises her above us ordinary creatures," Cecilia said. "The only thing she loves is Duty."

"Then Cecilia's name is duty, for I love her," Eugenia said. "Though what does it signify what we love? We must do our duty whether we love it or not."

Ibbetson coloured. Eugenia was not in the least thinking of him and his shortcomings as she spoke,

but he was in that state of dissatisfaction with self, when every moral aphorism seemed applicable to his own case.

"Well!" Cecilia added, with real feeling. "I shall never, I know, be happier than I have been here, nor care for anybody as much as I care for you, Eugenia. But although it is not exactly my duty to go to the other end of the world, I feel impelled to take the step. I want to make my fortune as fast as I can."

"You shall both come back, and both with fortunes made," answered Eugenia, "and will most likely find me plodding on as I am now."

"Nonsense! You will be nominated to some professorial chair long before, or otherwise get your deserts. I should not leave you if I were not convinced of it."

Then she turned round to the silent Ibbetson, and asked, vivaciously,

"What will you do with your fortune when you have made it?"

"I am sure I hardly know. Such a probability ever seemed to me too remote to be worth thinking about."

"My mind has been long made up," Cecilia rejoined. "A little farm, a flower-garden, a boat on a river. That is my ideal of idle enjoyment. Well! we will see who can win the race first."

Thus they talked on, winning Ibbetson over to a little cheerfulness and geniality in spite of himself. When at last Cecilia had to hurry off to her pupils, he took a small packet out of his pocket and turned towards Eugenia with a troubled air.

"Here is your money," he said in a voice that

trembled with emotion. "The committee in accordance with custom have sent me a cheque for first-class passage-money, and I go of course second or even third. I will write to you, if you will let me, when I have reached the other side of the world, and will then thank you, as I cannot do now."

"No need for thanks at all," Eugenia answered, blithely. "'Twas merely a business transaction such as one might make any day. You are too sensitive. But I am delighted, more than delighted, that Fortune smiles upon you at last. You will perhaps settle in that beautiful new country beyond the sea, and there found a family. Yes! these new worlds are the consolation of the old. Who knows but that I may follow you and Cecilia with my little family of brothers and sisters, there to settle also."

"If you would!" Ibbetson cried, a look almost of joy brightening his pale face, a look of sentiment also not escaping Eugenia's observation. She answered in the friendliest spirit, and with the unconcerned air of one man answering another,

"The thing is far from improbable. I am now in luck's way, but the spell of good fortune is not sure to last. I may be glad at some future time to change the hap-hazard and laborious career of a visiting tutor in London for a professorship in the colonies. And I might be better able there to provide for the future of my little ones, the boys as well as the girls. I shall hear from you and Cecilia. You will tell me exactly how you find the life and the people. So much of our comfort depends on those we have to do with."

"I will indeed write," Ibbetson said, with alacrity, and rising to go. He would fain have stayed for hours,

but he knew how precious was every moment to this busy girl. Whilst talking to him indeed, he noticed that she had been deftly fitting strings to the prettiest little bonnet imaginable.

"But I may come and see you again before I go, there are three whole weeks before the ship sails."

"Certainly," Eugenia replied. "We are always glad to see our friends on Sunday afternoons between four and seven. Come then."

"If I might come at some other time, I should infinitely prefer it," Ibbetson said.

"On most afternoons we are in to tea. We shall always give you a welcome," Eugenia answered, adding, with happy unconcern, "If you do not find me, Cecilia is pretty sure to be here, which is the same thing."

Ibbetson looked as if he thought that it was far from being the same thing; he merely made answer, however,

"You are most kind; I will take my chance."

CHAPTER V.

ONCE, twice, even three times Ibbetson took his chance, and as his lucky, or unlucky, stars would have it, on each occasion found Eugenia alone. It was in this girl's nature to be kind to everyone, and, having once taken Ibbetson under her protection, she was especially disposed to be kind to him. A slight tendency on his part to be sentimental would have disconcerted her but for the thought that the sea must soon divide them, and that in all probability new impressions would soon drive any recollections of too

vivid a nature out of his mind. She had long ago come to the happiest conclusions about her *protégé*. He was to prosper, to fall in love, to marry, little dreaming all the time what visions and aspirations were occupying the young man's thoughts from morning till night.

Ibbetson had of course fallen in love with Eugenia herself. How could it be otherwise? The thing had been inevitable from the moment that those soft eyes, so beautifully fringed with the dark lashes, had looked into his own with the keenest and tenderest womanly compassion. Eugenia had rescued him from despair, perhaps from sin, perhaps even from self-destruction, but she had not given him peace. Wherever he went, so at least he said to himself, he should feel the ache and blank of an unrequited love and a memory bitter-sweet. And, in spite of an inner voice that warned him of the hopelessness of such a passion, he felt that he must speak out. She must know the nature of the feeling she had awakened in his breast.

So, when he came for a third time and found her alone, he determined to say a word in his own behalf.

In two days' time the ship was to sail, and although Eugenia had promised to come on board and take leave of her friends there, he knew he should have no other opportunity of speaking to her alone.

The pair sat at Eugenia's little tea-table, and Ibbetson noticed that his hostess did not to-day from time to time glance at the clock. She had also taken off her bonnet, which he took to be a hopeful sign. Yes, there were no lessons to call her away at the end of the too brief hour. He was hers for a little while longer than usual.

"You said I might write to you," he began, nervously. "May I speak to you in my letters, not only of my surroundings but myself?"

"Certainly," was the ready reply. Truth to tell, at that moment Eugenia's mind was occupied with a wholly different matter. Thoughtful by nature, and trained to thought by education, life or books were always presenting some new problems to her.

Ibbetson's pale face flushed with disconcertment, and there was temper as well as dismay in his next speech.

"But to what purpose?" he said, tartly. "You will try to be interested, as you are trying to be interested now, with thoughts elsewhere."

"Pray forgive me," the girl replied, colouring with vexation. "I confess I am a little absent to-day. The fact is a very great honour has just been done me. I am asked to come forward as a candidate for the London School Board. The thing has taken me so wholly by surprise, I was so entirely unprepared, and the time given for deliberation is short. Pray, pray forgive my absent-mindedness."

Ibbetson sighed, almost groaned, it was the last plank withdrawn from the drowning man.

"I see how it is," he said, no longer hesitating and timorous, but emboldened by despair. "Your life is already more than full. You have too many interests ahead."

"Are you not glad that it should be so?" Eugenia asked, quickly. "It seems to me that only the life that is too full of interests is life indeed."

Again Ibbetson sighed.

"Oh!" he said, desperately. "Is love nothing? Is

a man's peace nothing? I am going to the other end of the world. But all my life is here, and you do not understand."

"I am very sorry."

"Yes," Ibbetson went on, still bitter almost to vindictiveness. "You are sorry for me now as when you found me starving in the streets; you are sorry because you are a woman, and have a kind heart. I am nothing to you."

"And that is not my fault," Eugenia urged, very gently. "But at least you are my friend. We will be friends always."

"I have had visions and aspirations since I first saw you," Ibbetson went on, gathering courage; "the glimpse of hope you brought me, transformed me into a new being. I determined to battle bravely for the honourable things of life, to become a man and a citizen indeed. I dreamed of returning to England in a few years' time and finding you the same, and something more——"

He turned upon her a quick, eager glance.

"Tell me at least that I am not here forestalled, the promise I would fain ask has not been accorded to another?"

"Dear friend," answered the girl, calmly and unhesitatingly, "I belong, at least for the present, to my work, and to my little brothers and sisters. Do not say a word more. We will always be friends. We will write to each other."

And with these words, repeated as a last farewell next day, Ibbetson was forced to be content.

As Cecilia indeed stood surrounded by a little group of friends, kissing this one shaking hands with

that, Eugenia came up to him, and said, in the friendliest manner,

"We will write to each other."

Then, after a passionate word or two whispered in her ear, the pair separated. Ibbetson to dream and conjure up visions, Eugenia to work and live in the practical world of realities.

Would Ibbetson be true to his word and to his ideals? Would he return years after and present himself to Eugenia as a worthy suitor?

Or, what seems likeliest, would he allow himself to be consoled by other eyes and other smiles?

Let us hope that the two B.A.'s, now thrown together by so odd a freak of fate, made a home in the new world together, and that the third they had left behind was made happy by hearing of their happiness.

TWO WINTER DAYS BY THE SEA.

CHAPTER I.

IN those fashionable watering places whither rich valetudinarians resort for health and idlers for pleasure, are often odd nooks and corners, in which the wretched hide their sorrows, and the despairing their forlornness.

The sea has ever such an attraction for the human mind that perhaps the passion could not be named which is not relieved by proximity to it: love, joy, hate, sorrow, what you will. And there is the fascination of seafaring life too, the constant association with a hardier race than that of inland places, the sights and sounds connected with perpetual danger, the sense of everlasting movement and variety, and, above all, the nearness to that friendly element which can so easily separate us from our enemies or our cares.

Our life even! No wonder that, wherever we find the sea, we find romance. Underlying the veneer of fashionable sea-side existence, we discover, if we go deep enough, the strong, rugged, primitive grain of human nature; partly from the enormous attraction

exercised by the ever-changeable element upon us all, and partly from the entire absence of the mercantile spirit as exhibited in our manufacturing towns, this primitive grain, moreover, has retained more of its freshness and daring than any other.

The sea, upon which no vulgar speculators can build; the sea, which fashion cannot touch with never so light a hand; the sea, which, from the beginning of man's story until now, has called forth all his daring, all his simplicity, all his strength; the sea makes us truer to ourselves than the varnished town, the luxurious country, the flattering salons, the selfish marts. The sea is not only by far the most beautiful spectacle God made for man, but it is the most stirring. We feel as if God himself were speaking to us in that mighty voice which even the glorious strains of Homer cannot approach.

It was Christmas Day in a well-known watering place in the south of England, where Christmas reminds one not unfrequently of Italy, so plentiful are the violets in the flower-market, so blue is the sky spanning one end of the brilliant white terrace-built town to the other, so mild the south wind making tender ripples in the soft blue sea. To-day, however, though the air was mild, and flowers in abundance decorated every open window, a sou-wester was blowing, and the waves, at high tide, in columns, were dashing over the iron rails of the esplanade, and even penetrating into kitchens and cellars. Young and old streamed forth to behold the sight and many a drenched youngster added to the general amusement.

How happy the world seemed on that bright afternoon! There were countless lovers to be seen climb-

ing the green hills that rose like a rampart behind the old historic part of the town; schoolboys and school-girls in holiday attire sporting beside their admiring parents; fishermen in bright new copper-coloured or blue serge jackets, grouped round the fish market, content to let their boats lie under the harbour for a day; even the old workhouse people had crawled out to enjoy the sight of the happy holiday-makers around them, their feeble pulses quickened for the time by their best dinner of the year.

“Ah,” thought a lonely spectator of all this cheerfulness, “how little do we realise what despair is till we ourselves have tasted it! I was once as careless, as easily pleased, as forgetful of the misery of others as this multitude. Can I wonder at the apparent heartlessness of the world now? Can I blame human nature for loving happiness and beauty and brightness better than misery, care, and gloom, I who fain would flee from myself if I could!”

He was still a young man,—though prematurely grey and aged; not striking in appearance at first sight; yet, if you looked at his face earnestly, you discovered something indescribably pathetic and sad, something rare and terrible also, for there you saw written that awful word, Despair. The brow was broad and noble, the mouth wanting in decision perhaps, but finely-shaped and sweet in expression; the head exquisitely proportioned, the brown curly hair thickly sprinkled with grey. It was not the head of a common man, and, setting aside that terrible look of one who hungers for comfort and finds it not, was interesting on account of lines and features. But, ah! how careworn!

He had been sitting in an easy-chair before his

cheerful little window for hours in wistful thought, looking upon the tossing sea and the moving crowds, the sea-gulls flying backwards and forwards, and the delicate, pearly sky, hardly seeing any of these things, but gazing and thinking because he could do nothing else. There were books in that sunny little room; they, if nothing else, proclaimed their owner to be a man of culture, but he had not opened one all day. There were newspapers, too, and a large desk littered with papers and manuscripts, which seemed to bespeak a literary taste, or perhaps profession. These too had been neglected for several days. He had occupied himself solely with his remorseful and unhappy thoughts, without doubt the worst occupation a man can have, and the result was, Despair.

There were sounds of family life and domestic enjoyment all over the house, he was but one lodger out of many; there was a piano overhead and a girl's sweet voice singing Christmas carols, underneath, an occasional burst of children's voices, on the steps, a light step tripping now and then, and a man's voice humming softly, or a boy's careless whistle. In fact the house was as full as it could be of happy people making holiday.

The long afternoon, short to others, almost interminable to him, drew in at last; there was a clatter of teacups all over the house, candles were carried hither and thither, curtains were drawn, the cosy Christmas evening, with its merry tea, its childish games, its chat and sociability had begun. Freeland felt as if he could bear it no longer. Long continued solitude, like long continued physical pain, makes the strongest of us childish in our desire for alleviation; only heal us

or make us better! we cry, we know not perhaps to whom.

He rang the bell, upon which appeared the maid-of-all-work bearing his one cup of tea and slice of bread and butter in rather more slovenly fashion than usual. Jane, like all the rest of the world, was full of holiday thoughts, dying, in fact, to be dressed in her best clothes and walking out with her impatient lover waiting below.

"Is Lucy in?" he asked, almost timidly, for he feared to betray his thought even to this rough country lass.

"Lucy has some little friends to tea, if you please, sir, and can't sing to you to-night. They are just making of a row over their Christmas-tree."

"And I hope you are going to have a treat too?" he said, affecting cheerfulness.

"Oh! for the matter of that, we girls must wait till Boxing Day," she answered, roughly; "we can only get a run out between the teas and the suppers on Christmas Day, what with all the company upstairs and down."

That gentle allusion to Boxing Day silenced him. Alas! next morning would come, and she would look appealingly at him, but he had nothing to give her.

As soon as she had left the room, he turned out his pockets desperately; he must have made a mistake and still possess a guinea, half a guinea, nay, a shilling somewhere. It could not be that he, Edward Freeland, born of gentlefolks, educated at the university, an associate of gentlemen, had come to this! But so it was. He searched vainly one pocket after the other, desk, and purse, and drawers; he did not at that moment

possess a single coin in the world. How had he come to this?

He covered his face with his hands, and, leaning his elbows on the table, tried for the thousandth time to answer the self-same question. With plenty of opportunities, with quite remarkable abilities, with average health, tact, and spirits, and certainly with no dislike to work, he yet found himself in the prime of life an all but ruined man. He was ruined, in fact, except that he yet possessed a faint glimmer of trust in himself. Encumbered with debt, maligned by his enemies, misjudged by his friends, forsaken and despised by society, he was in that evil plight when Life is a burden and Death were welcome.

How had he brought himself to this indeed? He could accuse himself of no vices that he dared not confess to a mother or sister if he had one. He had never been a drunkard, nor a gourmand, nor a gambler, nor a lover of low company; but he had been reckless in spending and giving beyond his means, careless alike of the present and the future, apt to imitate the habits of his richer associates, self-indulgent in his manner of life, and, herein lay the bitterest sting of all, overconfident in his own powers.

When Edward Freeland had begun a literary and artistic career fifteen years ago, the sun of popular, as well as social, favour burst suddenly upon him. There were not wanting indiscriminate personal admirers ready to praise him beyond his deserts; in society too he had been as well received as in the world of literature and art. On all sides praises and happy prophecies had been poured upon him. Is it not so in life? If one of our friends pays homage to our

talents, all the rest are sure to follow. If one critic proclaims to the world that he has found a genius, the others will believe it.

When it happened that much fair promise of excellence in Edward Freeland was nipped in the bud, not by the chilling frosts of popular incredulity, but by the scorching beams of unmerited adulation, he grew careless of his gifts, of his manner of life, and of his future. People told him that he was sure to make a large fortune some day, and he believed it; what was worse still, lived on it in perspective, without taking the necessary steps to earn it. And so, by an accumulation of small carelessnesses, and small indiscretions, and by one predominating fault of overweening self-confidence, this young man had brought himself to the verge of ruin.

The first downward steps began by that reckless habit of living on the future, vulgarly called, getting into debt. The large fortune, which he was said to be heir to by virtue of rare gifts and capacities, did not come, and as he had been persistently living upon it, no less so than if it were a veritable estate really bequeathed to him, a crisis was inevitable.

There came a morning when the following conversation, or something very like it, took place in half a dozen different circles of which he had once been the leading favourite.

"Have you heard the news about that foolish fellow Freeland?"

"No—but everything he has done of late is sadly inferior to his early productions. I begin to think with the newspapers that his is a very second-rate talent after all."

"Ah! I fear his affairs are in a very bad way. They say he has left London in debt."

"So we shall not secure him for our next dinner-party? that is tiresome."

Or, perhaps among more intimate acquaintances still, sympathy went a little further.

"Poor Freeland! in debt, obliged to leave London, out of health, out of spirits, his last works failures! I am very sorry for him."

The women were perhaps the least disposed to blame him, partly because the only serious transaction with his most intimate woman friend had been a protracted drawing-room flirtation, partly because it is in the nature of things that women pity men in misfortune more than his own sex.

But how could these fair friends help him? One indeed, a rich, beautiful and generous woman who had always treated him as a younger brother, and had done more than anyone or anything else to keep his nature pure and sweet as it still was, sent him an anonymous bank note of a hundred pounds. He guessed the donor and, in spite of her entreaties and persuasions, refused to retain the gift.

"I will fight the battle like a man," he said, with tears of humiliation and pride in his eyes. "I should hate myself ever after if I consented to take this kind of help from you. Only believe in me, and you will save me in the end."

She promised this; and pressing her hand, too miserable to say more, he rushed away, self-banished from the house which had been a paradise to him.

This was Edward Freeland's last appearance in London. Several months, nay, almost a year passed

since then, and he was no nearer the reparation of his fortunes. How the interval was spent none of his friends knew, and only his fellows in misfortune can picture the remorse and anguish of it, the self-burdened isolation of it. Oh! how he longed to flee from that weary burden, to die, die in his early manhood and end the struggle.

But he struggled on manfully, trying to work, trying to hope, trying to restore his old faith in himself. The Sybarite and the man of fashion vanished. He learned to live on almost Spartan's fare, made his journeys from place to place on foot, trying in fact by a hundred late economies to atone for the lavish expenditure of many years.

The hardest trial to bear of all was that any kind of mental effort was irksome to him. Everything that he did was an Ichabod, a child of tribulation, and, as he thought, ill-favoured to look upon. The hand that had wielded with such facile strength and lightness the pen and the pencil, now moved heavily and coldly; the flash of early inspiration, the flower of youthful passion, the glow of pristine enthusiasm, seemed all to have forsaken him, and more than once, from his inmost heart of hearts, a cry had gone forth to those former comforters, bitter as that of Job, "Have pity, have pity on me, ye, oh, my friends." If, indeed, these friends should forsake him, fancy, creativeness, judgment, what must he do but fall in the struggle, and die, a forlorn and dishonoured man?

And just at this Christmas-tide an unusual despondency and gloom had fastened upon him, shutting out what light and cheerfulness he had hitherto lived in. Both artist and poet, with him poetry and paint-

ing went hand in hand. If he could not please himself with what he wrote, it was in vain that he took up his palette and brush. One or two efforts had proved disastrous failures, from the simple reason that he had put into both poem and picture too much self and too much sorrow. "Joys impregnate, sorrow brings forth," has written a great artist, but to poor Freeland's share only barren sorrows had fallen of late.

He wondered, as he thought of these things this Christmas evening, if anyone else in all the world were as wretched as himself. He sipped his lonely cup of tea by firelight, missing what had been of late his only solace under misfortune, namely, a sweet-faced, golden-haired little child. This was the Lucy for whom he had inquired half an hour ago, his landlord's little daughter, who made acquaintance with all the lodgers, entwining herself round their hearts, not by virtue of any special beauty or gifts, but the sheer innocence and happiness of childhood.

There is this sweetness about childhood that it does not love only what is young and innocent and joyous like itself, but also what is old and careworn and sad. A little child will as naturally throw its soft arms about the neck of a withered old woman as fresh young ivy will spread its tendrils round the rugged bark of veteran oak. Childhood has happiness enough and to spare, and it smiles, frisks, and fondles care, ugliness, or age.

Little Lucy was in the habit of standing on the hearthrug whilst Freeland took his tea and singing to him, or, what she loved better still, reciting little pieces. It amused him to listen to that artless voice, to watch those large, questioning, innocent blue eyes

and kitten-like young limbs, hardly ever at rest. She was seven years old, and whenever Freeland had sixpence to spare—alas! the sixpences had grown rarer and rarer of late—it had been spent on dolls or sweet-meats for his little favourite. Would Lucy cease to care for him, he wondered, with a dreary smile, if he never gave her anything again?

He was reduced to pennilessness at last, and, what was worse still, he owed money for rent and food, and had none forthcoming, none. With rigid punctuality he had always reserved some portions of his earnings for the discharge of his larger debts, so leaving himself only a few pounds to meet the emergencies of the hour. And now his purse was empty without any chance of replenishing. Till he could write or draw again he must exist, if exist at all, on credit.

But why must he live at all?

Ah! There was the old tempter at the door. Again and again, when brought face to face with larger, but less trying miseries than these, he had asked himself this question, and again and again he had answered it in the affirmative.

But never before seemed there such excuse for resigning a burden which had long been insupportable. If he could not work, he could not subsist except on charity, and was not this last a greater indignity and a greater piece of cowardice than to give up the struggle altogether.

He had paid his creditors a part of what was due, he had honourably faced his difficulties and done his best to extricate himself from them. But now that he saw himself disarmed in the thick of the fight, might he not fairly be pardoned for running away? His

power of work gone, all was gone. Better far to die than to impose himself a burden on society and the world.

And the solution of the problem just now seemed the easiest in the world. The waves were running high, the night was pitch dark, the place was growing solitary. Many a sane and happy man had lost his life here now from venturing unwarily under the cliffs when the tide was coming in, and, as he was much given to nocturnal rambles, perhaps even suspicion of self-murder might not light upon him.

Or, instead of encountering the tide under the cliffs, there was a favourite and romantic walk on the top, where by day sign-boards having "*Danger*" printed in large red letters warned the pedestrian not to go too near. What so easy as to climb the rock and make a false step in the dark!

He rose to the window and looked out. The breakers were dashing against the esplanade, pitchy black save for the white line of each succeeding crest. The sobbing, surging sound had never exercised so powerful a fascination over him as now. Like mighty arms and mighty voices the waves seemed to beckon him, to invite him into the eternal rest.

He gazed and listened till that interpretation had taken complete hold of him, making his brain giddy, his knees tremble, his heart a-throb. Peace was all he asked, and was not peace here? What friends nor hope had promised, promised these commiserating waves, only waiting, only asking to rock him to everlasting sleep! It could not matter to God, to the world, to the happy sunshine, to the flowers that one fragmentary, unfruitful life had lapsed into forgetfulness a little before its time. Would not

God forgive him, who alone could tell the bitterness of his sorrow? Would not his friends forgive him, and blame themselves perhaps for having judged him harshly in life? Would not the world forgive him, only too thankful to be rid of one burden more.

Could he forgive himself?

He thought so as he leaned his burning forehead on the cold window panes, recalling his past life. That poor self of his had not been kindly used, ought he to give it one more chance? but no, he had done his best to atone for former shortcomings, and had failed. His hand seemed against every man, and every man's hand against him. Let his end accuse human pity and human injustice, himself surely it could not disparage.

"I come, I come," he said at last, "I obey the voice which has called me so long. Wait for me!"

And, firmly resolved indeed no longer to prolong a struggle which promised to end in ignominy only, he lighted a candle and made his last preparations. They were simple and few. He wrote no farewell letters, made no parting testament, wishing as much as possible to obviate all suspicion of the truth, only desirous that Lucy's family should not lose the little he owed them.

Having burnt a few letters, he took off his watch—that faithful friend from which he had allowed no pinch of poverty to separate him—and laid it on the mantelpiece, thinking with some satisfaction that it would almost repay them.

Then he turned over his books, thinking he should like to write the name of that beautiful and generous friend in one; she would be sure to have it some day,

and would drop a tear of pity and forgiveness on the page, maybe a tear of fond recollection, of love even, too. But his stock of these too faithful friends had dwindled down to some score or so of well-worn pocket volumes in whose company he had chiefly lived of late, and so dear had these become to him, that tears of wistfulness filled his eyes as he bade them farewell. Of all, none seemed so suitable a parting gift to the one being he still adored, as a tiny copy of Schiller's poems. Schiller of all the poets in the world is the poet of the sorrowful, and the passages he had marked again and again would remind her of him and his aspirations after a better life, never to be realized.

With a trembling hand, and blinding tears distorting the letters, he wrote that exquisite name—

“IRENE,”

adding underneath the date and the word “*Forgive.*”

She seemed as far from him as the heavens from the sea; she moved in a brilliant circle, the guiding star and joy of all; she, the guileless and the lofty-minded, had shown alone of all his friends, compassion for his going astray. He tried to frame a benediction over the name ere it was put out of remembrance, nay, out of his life for ever!

With a great sob he put away the book after kissing the words he had written a dozen times. Then there seemed no more to do.

Was he decided to do this thing? he asked himself once more ere he touched the door handle. Could he reconcile self-annihilation to his conscience? could he consent to take away his last chance of expiation, atonement, regeneration? namely, life; again and again,

his heart wilfully answered Yes. He was neglected and forgotten by all who had loved him in his youth and prosperity. He was despised by the world that had once been at his feet. None would miss or weep or lament him. He could not do a better thing than die.

He blew out the light, opened the door, and descended the staircase, staggering blindly under the weight of that awful purpose, looking neither to the right nor to the left, lest any heaven-sent interference should drive him from his resolve, willed to die now that death seemed so easy!

But just as he opened the front door, letting in a rainy gust and the sight of the black, starless heavens, the street lamp flickering dimly, and the dark tide with its glistening white crests, a little voice was heard below calling his name, and lo! before he could escape, a pair of soft arms were thrown round his neck, and a sweet, artless face was pressed against his own.

It was little Lucy, not the little Lucy of week-days in cotton frock, hob-nail boots, and holland pinafore, but the little Lucy of Christmas-tide, with flowers in her golden hair, a white dress, and fairylike little shoes with crimson sandals.

She was, as we have said, no extraordinary child, merely a loving, gentle seven year old maid with wondering blue eyes, sweet, childish ways and candid, affectionate inspirations and ever-joyous mind.

"Mr. Freeland," she said, clinging to him, "oh! I have had so many Christmas gifts; and see, here is one for you from mother and me. Is it a pretty pen-wiper, do you think, and will you give me a kiss for it?"

He kissed her several times without a word, and would have left her then; but she persisted in turning out her pocket full of presents one by one, that he might see and admire all.

"And to-morrow I shall wake as early as I can to look at my stocking—last year it was quite full. Do you think it will be as full this year?"

"I am afraid I have nothing to put in it," he said, with a grim smile.

"Oh! yes, you will find something, and, if not to-morrow, this time next year," she answered, laughing gaily. "But what have you got your hat on for? You cannot want to go out on such a night."

"I want to go out very much, little Lucy. Don't hold me back. Good night," he said, still persuading himself that he had not swerved from his resolve.

"Oh! no, you must not," she persisted, pulling his coat-tails with her eager little hands; "I won't let you go."

"But I must," he said.

"No, you must come upstairs and sit by the fire instead," she added, and led him playfully back to his lonely hearth, where after many caresses she left him.

He covered his face with his hands, and it seemed to him as if now indeed death were clothed with terror. He could not bear to think that his story should be the first shadow darkening this innocent, happy life, that his image should become one of horror to a guileless little child who loved him, that those wondering blue eyes should ask the reason of a dark mystery in vain. Children soon forget their friends, and if he went away Lucy would ere long cease to think of him. But, if he did this evil thing, there

would be something that she could never forget, something supernaturally awful and melancholy connected with his name, something mysterious none could make clear to her. She often amused herself for hours on the beach alone, blithe as a bird or young kitten, but would not such a tragedy as his drop like a black cloud upon that peace and joyousness, making the life that had been hitherto all sunshine and serenity, a thing of dark riddles, of woe, of despair? All this might be chimerical and moonshine only, Lucy might only hear of his fate vaguely and carelessly, and never be disturbed by any other of the horrors his fancy had conjured up.

Yet having once realized that, friendless as he was, fallen as he was, despairing as he was, his self-sought death might, must in fact, lessen by never so small a degree the hopefulness and joyousness of life to others, that to die so was to weaken the faith of the wavering, to strengthen the selfishness of despair, to add one more drop to the ocean of irremediable, inevitable human misery, he could not choose but pause. For hours he wrestled with himself. He could no longer persuade himself that he had a right to do this, and, falling on his knees in a transport of entreaty and thankfulness, he cried, again and again,

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

CHAPTER II.

TEN years have passed, and once more Freeland is looking on the same bright picture at Christmas-tide, but with what altered feelings?

He has come to the seaside for a brief holiday, and, instead of dark thoughts and gloomy purposes accompanying him, is hemmed round about by love and joy.

He looks indeed years younger, and how much better too! Not in the matter of bodily health only, but of moral well-being! True manfulness now asserts itself in his mien, and even dress, for the outward garb is also an indication of man's spiritual condition.

To use a homely phrase, the long lane of evil fortune had at last come to a turning, and Freeland was now, if not a happy man, at least content. Perhaps it was not in his nature to be joyous, but he felt that he had gained a haven from the worst ills of life, and he had gained it unaided and alone.

Herein lay the secret of his frank, cheerful looks. He had not only mastered evil fortune but himself, and had doggedly repaired the havoc, indolence, self-indulgence, and want of spirit had made in his best years. For he was no longer young, and one of his keenest regrets in reviewing the past, arose from the sense of lost time. Those unhappy years, as he saw clearly enough brought about by his own weakness, could never be regained. The penalty of folly had been paid, but the forfeited prime of manhood and intellectual strength was a forfeit for once and for all.

There was sadness, mingled with cheerfulness, therefore, in Freeland's looks as he stood this bright winter day gazing on the southern English sea, in sight of which he had lived such fearful days just ten years ago.

As he stood thus lost in reverie, a fair-haired,

blue-eyed little girl, a very copy of himself, nestled to his side.

"Ah!" he said, as he took the child on his knees, and kissed her with the adoring fondness, less of a father than of a passionate lover of little children. "To-day, Irene, is to be a grand day. The beautiful godmother you have so often heard father talk of is coming to see us."

"Papa!" cried the child, "there is some one else I want to see even more than my godmother. Can we not find the little Lucy you have talked of too? Your own little friend? I want to play with her."

Freeland smiled, as he caressed her.

"You would see some one quite grown up, if we could find her," he said. "She was just Irene's age when she was papa's friend; but that is ten summers ago. She would now be as old as Aunt Emmy."

"Do not people ever stand still? Must we all grow so fast?" asked Irene, impatiently. Then, smiling at her own speech, she said, "But we must find Lucy all the same, papa."

"People come and go in this world, Irene, and we make friends every day we never see again. I have more than once tried to find Lucy. But her parents removed long ago, leaving no address. We might as well try to look for the pebble you played with yesterday."

Just then a fair, gentle young woman came in and put sixpence in Irene's hands. It was Mary Freeland, who, busied in preparing for her husband's guest, had no time to look at the sea just then.

"Run downstairs, Irene, and buy some flowers of the flower-girl at the door, for the decoration of our

table," she said. "And, Edward, will you receive our guest if she arrives before I am ready? I must put on my best gown, you say? Though why, I cannot conceive."

There was a touch of playful jealousy in this last speech, for Mary, whilst adoring her husband, could but feel a trifle curious now and then of the life that belonged to him and could never belong to her. He was past fifty when he had wedded her, a bride of twenty-two, and, although there had ever been perfect harmony between them, she felt as if she should never understand his existence as he could understand hers. This beautiful visitor, for instance. Why so much preparation and formality on her account?

"Best gown, indeed!" Freeland answered, smiling. "Yes, Mary, and whatever else you may have of finery. This lady was once my best friend, as I will tell you some day."

The young wife went upstairs, leaving Freeland lost in reverie.

Was it, indeed, true? Was this fond, fair Mary his own wife? this sweet, clinging child his own too? It was, above all, the dependance of these two gentle beings upon him that made both so exquisite and dear. To the mother he was, if not a tower of strength, at least a staff and a shelter; but to the child he was all in all, a providence, a teacher, a good angel.

Looking back on the slough of despair through which he had passed ten years ago, and the brightness and comparative smoothness of his daily life now, his eyes filled with grateful tears. The words of the poet, in his own case so entirely vindicated, came into his mind:

“And who is she? Can that be Joy,
Who, with a sunbeam for her guide,
Smoothly skims the meadows wide,
Whilst Faith from yonder opening cloud,
To hill and vale proclaims aloud,
Whate’er the weak may dread, the wicked dare,
Thy lot, oh, man! is good, thy portion fair!”

As he reviewed now the years that had intervened between the abyss of dejection and despair in which he had been plunged and the peace and sunshine now his portion, he acknowledged that the mender of his fortunes had been himself.

Should it not ever be so?

Freeland’s worldly redemption had been the result of small beginnings. First of all he had taken heart, then he had exercised humility, contenting himself with small gains and unobtrusive efforts, counting no task too mean that should enable him to live and hold up his head like a man. So by little and little, these modest earnings affording the wherewithal to eat, drink, and be clothed, he regained the old spirit, fire, and self-confidence. He then set to work rather out of love for the work itself than for any thoughts of hire, till he gradually saw himself winning, certainly not fame and fortune, but recognition and a modest competency.

Love came next of the quiet, domestic kind, and, with his peaceful marriage, the collectedness that accompanies a life anchored for once and for all.

And friendship that seemed to have deserted him, though in truth it was not so, he could once more enjoy, having no longer any claims to make of it but sympathy and the sweet serviceableness of according minds.

What indeed had he not now that he most craved? Peace without and peace within. Hopes that soared not too high, and a career by no means splendid, yet without sordidness and carking care. He might well rejoice.

CHAPTER III.

His reverie was interrupted by Mary, who now came in leading their beautiful guest friend by the hand, the little Irene following, with eyes full of admiration and wonder. Never had she seen so fair an apparition as the gracious, stately creature so richly appavelled, yet so artless.

This elder Irene was no longer young, but what has real beauty to do with youth? The smile, the light of the eye, the lovely soul were there, if the velvety bloom of complexion and the softness of line were diminished.

Perhaps Freeland's guest seemed more beautiful than she really was by virtue of the state in which she had come, the rich velvet gown, the superb jewel on her breast, the ermine cloak all lending sumptuousness to a really splendid creature. The splendour, however, that for a moment dazzled the eyes was soon forgotten, and only the sweetness and graciousness taken account of, for this queenly lady had the sweetest smile in the world, a very benediction seemed to lurk in it.

"Come and help mother to prepare the dessert," Mary whispered in the child's ear, as soon as the first greetings were over. She naturally divined that Free-

land might wish to say a word to such a friend that even his wife should not hear.

"How little you are changed!" were Freeland's first words, as he gazed admiringly on his still beautiful friend. "And I am, or, at least, feel myself, already an old man."

The lady laughed gently.

"If you are old, I must be old too. We are of the same generation," she said. "You, too, look the same to me."

"There is comfort in that," Freeland said. Then he added, quickly changing the topic, for there was one thing he did want to say to his friend alone, "And comfort in the thought that, if changed at all, 'tis a change for the better. But you, at least, ever believed in me," he said.

"Because I felt sure that, in spite of what you might say or do, you believed in yourself," was the reply. "We must each be the champion of our own poor lives."

"True," he said. "In one sense, the human creature must ever stand alone. That lesson, at least, adversity has taught me."

For a moment the lady was silent, then, with heightened colour, she said,

"Were it otherwise, there could be no even friendship in the world. Tell me the truth—you once thought hardly of me? Had I given you the half of my fortune when yours were at the lowest ebb, you would have hated me now."

"Hated myself, rather," answered Freeland.

"You would never have lived to see so good a

day as this," she added. Then, holding out her hand, she said, "I look upon you as a conqueror."

They clasped hands, and Freeland answered, in a voice of deepest feeling,

"In my heart of hearts I never accused you of hardness. You were but true to yourself. Your friends could not be of the undignified and the weak. I had fallen through weakness."

That pleasant, pleasant day! The little Irene would never forget it. The beautiful lady and the beautiful banquet in her honour, the wonderful gifts she had brought them, papa's high spirits, mamma's delight, the drive into the open country, the flower-bedecked tea-table, the evening's gaiety! It would be hard to say who enjoyed it most, and, when Mary was trying to get Irene to sleep, again the lines came into Freeland's mind—

"Whate'er the weak may dread, the wicked dare,
Thy lot, oh! man, is good, thy portion fair."

A CHRISTMAS CABFUL.

CHAPTER I.

WE need not cross our neighbour's threshold to know what goes on within, as this story will show. Every day the comedy or tragedy of life is acted before the eyes of those who read as they run, and many a useful lesson we may learn as we linger on our doorsteps, or peer out of our windows.

The Christmas season was drawing near, and even in the shabby genteel suburban quarters of which I write preparations were being made for its celebration. These small streets made up of tiny houses, villas, so called, the one as like the other as two cherries, were all beginning to put on a holiday appearance. In one window you might see a cheap little Christmas-tree, in another a display of holly, and, at the sight of the daily cart, with its burden of shining green leaves and red berries, out would rush a dozen children to make the best bargain they could with their pennies. Flowers also were at a premium, and pots of primula and geranium gradually made a show on every window sill.

At our opposite neighbour's, however, not a sign was given of approaching festivities, and no wonder. So many children went in and out that the marvel was rather how their almost countless mouths were filled, than that no money was forthcoming for Christmas luxuries. The house was no larger than other people's. The occupants, judging from appearances, no richer, yet from some motive or other, most likely a philanthropic one, they had added to their own family, already pretty numerous, a second, consisting of father, mother, and no less than seven children of all ages. The care-worn look of the parents and the general shabbiness of the little ones told their own story. The head of this poor house had come down by misfortune or ill-luck. Ruin and disaster were written on his face, and most probably he had come to London to try to begin life afresh. As day by day we saw him slowly and sadly come up the street at nightfall, we knew without the telling that the long lane of evil chance had not yet turned for him. Did not the very door-knock tell us this, always so unemphatic and depressed? And the sad face of the patient woman who opened to him. What need to hear the ever recurring query:—

“No news?”

And the perpetual answer,

“None whatever.”

This had gone on for weeks, but about ten days before Christmas our surmises were set at rest by a wholly unexpected occurrence. Two vehicles drove up to the door early in the morning, one an open luggage-cart with two horses, the second a common cab, and into these father, mother, babies, and boxes were

slowly packed, many of the neighbours, like ourselves, looking on.

We soon divined what was happening. In such close quarters as this narrow street, it is impossible to have secrets. The very words uttered on the opposite doorsteps reached us as we stood at the windows, and revealed to us the solution of the problem. The vehicles were bound to the docks. The family were going to the Antipodes.

It was hard to say who seemed most satisfied, those bound seawards, or those to be left behind. Poverty cannot stand on ceremony, and there was no reason to conceal the truth. Host and hostess could but rejoice, after subdued fashion, in this wholesale departure. The strain alike upon their patience and their purses had been heavy. They had indeed aged by ten years within the last month or two. A poorly paid clerk, with an ailing wife, and several children need no poor relatives to drag him down. It is only by force of great effort and perpetual self-denial that he can just hold up his head.

The adieux, however, were affectionate, and all kinds of little comforts and distractions had been provided for them. A canary, dolls, cheap toys, these and many more things we saw put into the cab. Then came the final farewells.

"Good-bye, Tommie; one more kiss," said the mother left behind to the baby boy held up by the mother in the cab. "Bless him! how I shall miss his sweet smile," added the poor woman, laughing and crying, so sorry, yet so rejoiced to be rid of her visitors!

"Mind and write from Plymouth," said the host.

"Sorry I couldn't go to Gravesend, but it's stocktaking. Couldn't be spared. You will write?"

"Bye-bye, Connie. Bye-bye, Alfie. Bye-bye, Susie. Bye-bye, Willy," cried half a dozen little voices on the door-steps, and as many echoed back the words from the two vehicles; for the elder boys had perched themselves on the boxes. "Bye-bye all."

And at last the little caravan did really move off.

CHAPTER II.

It may easily be conceived with what alacrity the poor housewife set to work to put the house in order after such an invasion. The sweep, the charwoman, the washerwoman, the family carpenter, were straightway put into requisition. Every window in the house was thrown wide open, and, without exercising any indiscreet curiosity, we could see what was going on. Here were little bedsteads that had been hired or borrowed being taken down, there dilapidation being repaired; in the little garden at the back, carpets being shaken and clothes hung out to dry. Every corner presented a scene of cheerful bustle. Christmas was at hand. The exigencies of Christian charity and good-fellowship had been fulfilled. It was high time to think a little of themselves, these good people evidently said, as they put everything in order for the holiday season.

So actively were these proceedings carried on that, before the brief winter day was drawing in, the front parlour and bed-rooms were metamorphosed, floors scrubbed, well-beaten carpets put down, furniture

brushed, broken chairs mended—everything, indeed, was in order. The sleeping-rooms had also undergone transformation; the floors had been scrubbed, fires made to dry them, clean muslin curtains and bed-furniture got out. The place began to assume its familiar aspect, our opposite neighbour being what is commonly called “an excellent manager,” but who can keep a house in order when the number of inmates is suddenly more than doubled? Then the boys! Thank heaven, my children are most of them girls! we heard the poor woman say as she gave her orders in the hall.

All things then were resuming a normal appearance, when our attention was suddenly arrested by one of those cries of dismay, almost of horror, that rise above every other sound. We ran to the window, to the door, thinking that something terrible had happened, that our poor neighbour had been stricken by sudden illness, that one of the children had fallen in a fit, or the house was on fire.

Our surmises were false, yet the cry was one of no empty alarm. There, slowly coming up the street, packed as closely as when it went away, was the same cab we had seen in the morning. There were father, and mother, and the children; there were those terrible boys on the box, impossible to mistake the true state of affairs. All had come back again. No wonder our opposite neighbour stood pale as a ghost, trembling from head to foot, and wringing her hands! As long as I live I shall never forget the speechless terror of that wan, worn face, at first agonized doubt pictured on it, then still more agonized certainty, as the heavily-laden vehicle drew up. There they were indeed, and she could not send them away.

CHAPTER III.

So the little beds had to be put up again, and the spick and span rooms were re-occupied by the terrible invaders, and the milkman was sent for, and the baker, and the buttermilkman, and things were just as trying as before.

We gathered from those first agonized queries put on the doorstep that something had gone wrong with the emigrant ship, in which the party were to sail for New Zealand, at the last moment, and that several weeks might elapse before she would be ready. There was no cure for the evil hap but resignation. After all, things might have been so much worse, we heard some friendly soul say to the poor, pale housewife over the way.

"A bad fever might have broken out, or a fire, or your husband—what now if anything had happened to him? or if the baby had got the croup!"

And, what with one consoler and another, our neighbour soon recovered from the shock, and by the time Christmas came round the little household wore quite a cheerful aspect. We surmised, indeed, from numerous signs that, after this piece of ill hap, some small windfall of better kind had followed. A rich relation or benevolent friend must have sent a handsome present, or the Antipodes-bound family have come in for a small legacy. What may not come to pass in the shape of good luck any day?

Be this as it may, it was pleasant to see the burden of care evidently lightened, and the holiday season cheered for these worthy, much-tried souls. And at

last final departure did come early in the new year. Adieux were made over again. The boys, the babies, the dolls, and the canary were re-packed. The heavily-laden cab disappeared, this time not painfully and pathetically to crawl up the street a few hours after.

And once more the business of cleaning was cheerfully got through, and the little beds were taken down, and the broken chairs mended, and the floors scrubbed, not in vain. The ship really sailed at last, let us hope carrying good fortune with it. That Christmas cabful would never again trouble the peace of our little street.

THE END.

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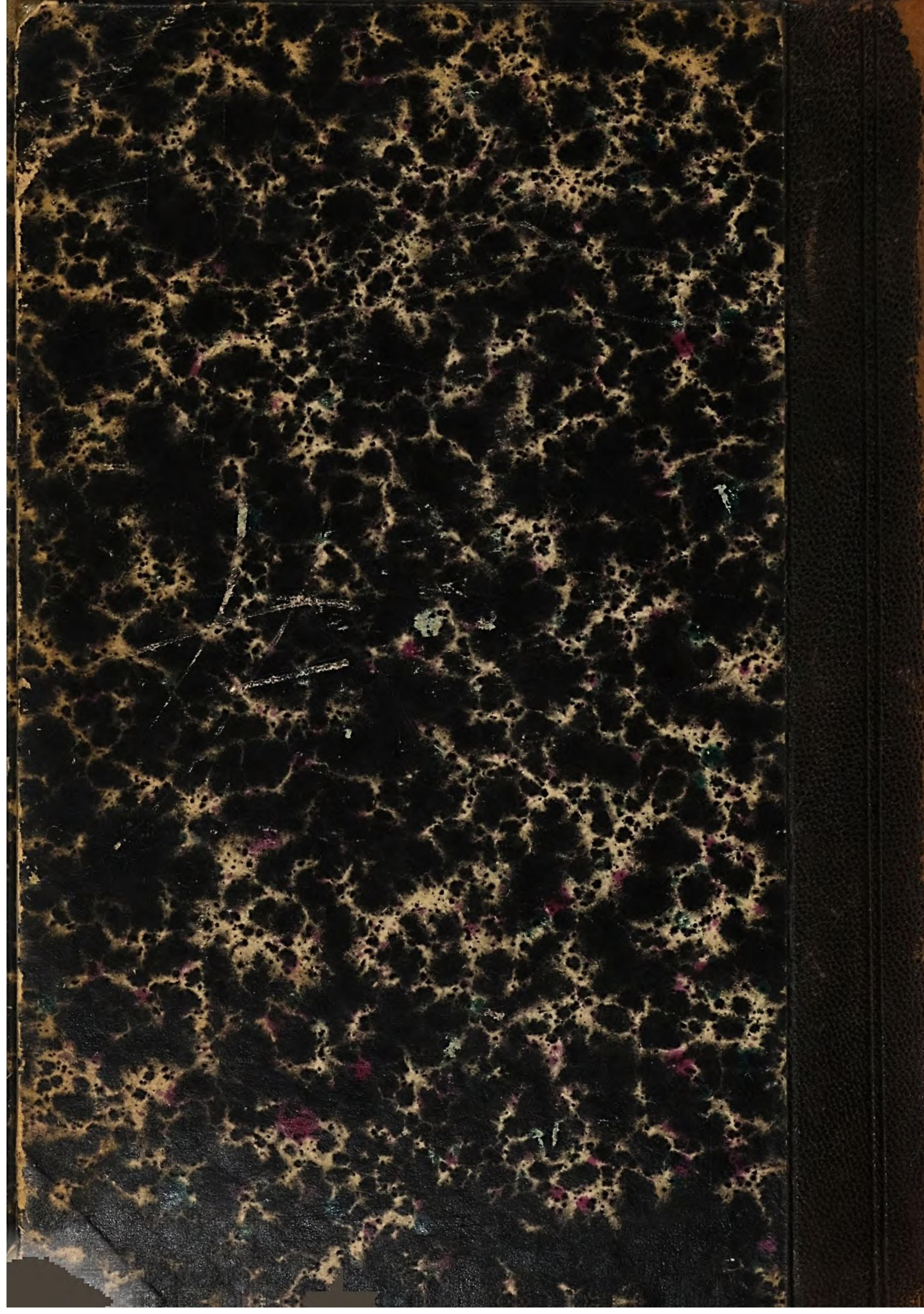
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